



THE LEVEN HOUSE: ESSENTIAL TO THE PRESERVE

“Next to the large black cherry stump, you can see a small stand of witch hazels. We planted these back when I was in high school, sometime around 2004.” I’m standing beside those witch hazels, explaining our long involvement at the Marie Butler Leven Preserve to a tour group organized by the Virginia Native Plant Society. The Preserve is a 20-acre park in McLean.

Behind me is a section of forest I cleared of invasives with two friends during the summer of 2007. Every morning we would arrive early, hack our way through dense stands of multiflora rose, burning-bush, and mile-a-minute. Some workdays ended early because of the oppressive heat, and we’d have to measure our progress in inches rather than feet. But now, nearly a decade later, the understory remains free of invasives and a new native shrub layer is growing in.

In front of me, behind the small crowd of native plant enthusiasts, is a mowed field that we began to restore in 2013. The small corner we

tilled, reseeded, and replanted is already packed with native meadow species and last summer, it hosted dozens of butterflies and bees. We recently met with Park Authority naturalists to expand this meadow in the coming years.

Every year brings more progress on the restoration of the Preserve grounds. We still have a long way to go, but last year we took another major step forward: we extended our work to include the Leven House, the Preserve’s only built structure. Using only funds donated by our supporters, we’ve embarked on a thorough upgrade of the house.



The goal is to maintain the house’s exterior aesthetics and update the interior to serve as a residence for two members of the Sangha’s staff: Katherine, my wife, and me. Our presence at the Preserve will allow for more rapid progress on the grounds. Once work on the house is completed this summer, we plan to install a native landscape around the house, using plants from our own Wild Plant Nursery. Park visitors will notice considerable aesthetic improvements, and maybe bring home some ideas for their own landscapes.

For more information about the Leven House project, or to make a donation, contact Sophie Lynn, who is volunteering as our Native Arboretum Capital Project Manager, at slynn@earthsangha.org.

— Matt Bright, Conservation Manager

WE’LL LET YOU KNOW IF IT WORKS



In February, our volunteers tried out something new — or at least, new to us. We are trying to control the large invasive shrub Amur honeysuckle (*Lonicera maaackii*) in Roundtree Park, in Falls Church, Virginia. After cutting away all of the top-growth, we covered the stumps with special black bags to prevent resprouting. This technique wouldn’t work with invasive species that resprout extensively from their roots, but it might work with species like this one, which tends to resprout only near its main stem. We’ll let you know what happens!

Photos: At top, March saw rapid progress on the Leven House upgrade at the Marie Butler Leven Preserve, in McLean, Virginia. At left, will these plastic bags erase an invasive thicket? See the note below the photo. Bird portrait: a prairie warbler (*Dendroica discolor*), photographed last December by Bill Williams in our Tree Bank program area, along the Dominican Republic / Haiti border. Bill was one of six expert birders who helped us begin a Tree Bank bird census. (See page 5.) This species is migratory: it overwinters in our Tree Bank area but breeds in the United States. To protect it, we need to conserve both its breeding and winter habitats. See some of Bill’s other bird portraits inside.



GREENHOUSED AGAIN!

Our greenhouse production has resumed — and we are very grateful for all of the help that we are getting from the agencies that own these facilities.

Greenhouse production allows us to get the jump on spring. By propagating thousands of native herbaceous (non-woody) plants in late winter, we can better serve the numerous local restoration projects that need spring planting stock.

As we mentioned in the December *Acorn*, we thought that our work in the Fairfax County Park Authority’s greenhouse in Chantilly, Virginia, had likely come to an end. This 3,000-square-foot facility was built in 1988, and Park Authority officials had grown concerned about liability for the aging structure. But at the Park Authority’s request, the County Attorney’s office looked into the matter and concluded that the current insurance is adequate. So in January, we went back to work, and the greenhouse is now packed with some 16,000 seedlings destined mostly for local meadow projects.

We thank all our Park Authority colleagues for working with us to solve this problem. We are especially grateful to Dave Murphy and Troy Miller for helping us manage the greenhouse. Troy is the Park Operations Area Manager for the Park Authority’s Area 5, in the western part of the County. He knows a lot about irrigation systems — much more than we do. We are drawing regularly on the abilities of both Troy and Dave to keep the greenhouse working properly. (In the top left photo, that’s Dave on the left and Troy on the right.)

We have also stepped up our work with Melissa Westbrook at the US Park Service greenhouse on Daingerfield Island in Alexandria. (In the top right photo, that’s Melissa on the left, with volunteer Joan Gottlieb.) Melissa has been very generous with both her time and her greenhouse space. Her greenhouse is smaller than the one in Chantilly, but it still has room for hundreds of seedlings, and Melissa is a skilled and accommodating partner.



CONSERVATION ISN'T GOING AWAY

If you care about conservation, you’re probably not loving the news these days. Drastic funding cuts proposed for federal agencies that play critical roles in confronting climate change and preserving natural areas; the proposed elimination of the EPA Clean Power Plan; the actual elimination of a rule against dumping mine waste into streams — no doubt you’ve heard all this and more.

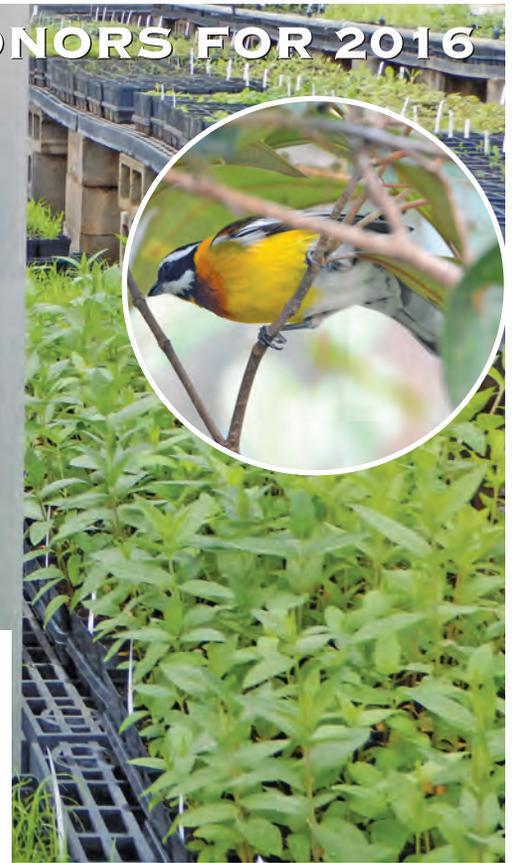
Given the setbacks, it may be difficult to avoid a sense of futility. Is the kind of work that the Sangha does — local, “hands-on” conservation — even worthwhile any more?

I believe that efforts like ours are growing, not less, but more important, and for a couple of reasons. First, there is an intrinsic value in what we do. If the invasive Amur honeysuckle is damaging plant communities along Holmes Run (as indeed it is), then we should continue to work with the Fairfax County Park Authority to loosen the honeysuckle’s grip and restore the native riparian vegetation. Of course, politics matters, but when we’re out there, the honeysuckle problem comes first. We have a commitment to the lands and waters around us. Politicians may decide to abandon their environmental responsibilities, but that doesn’t mean that we should abandon ours.

Continued on the back page . . .

Photos: Top left, Dave Murphy (left) and Troy Miller, two of our Fairfax County Park Authority colleagues, at the Park Authority’s greenhouse in Chantilly, Virginia, in March. Dave and Troy are very valuable colleagues because they actually understand how things work — things like irrigation, ventilation, and heating. Thousands of seedlings owe their lives to this understanding. (See page 3 for a picture of some of those grateful seedlings.) Top right, US Park Service horticulturist Melissa Westbrook (left) with our efficient and thorough volunteer Joan Gottlieb at the USPS greenhouse on Daingerfield Island in Alexandria, Virginia, in February. Thanks to Melissa and Joan, this greenhouse too has become a seasonal native-herb factory. Bill’s bird: an Antillean mango (*Anthracothorax dominicus*). This large hummingbird (about 4.5 inches long) is fairly common over most of the island; it also occurs on Puerto Rico. The black plumage marks this one as a male.

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Our 2016 Government Partners

Our government partners are crucial allies in conservation. We are grateful for the funding that these agencies provided for our work last year.

Fairfax County, Virginia: \$16,150 for work in Fairfax County parks and schoolyards.

The Virginia Chesapeake Bay Restoration Fund: \$8,000 for restoration of riparian plant communities in Northern Virginia.

Photos: Seedlings of meadow grasses and forbs enjoyed March indoors, in the big greenhouse in Chantilly, Virginia. (See page 2 for more on the greenhouse situation.) Bill's bird: a Hispaniolan spindalis (*Spindalis dominicensis*). This species is endemic to Hispaniola's mountain forests — that is, it does not live anywhere else. It is still locally common but is in decline because of deforestation.

We thank everyone who has given to the Sangha, in whatever form. We owe a special debt of gratitude to these people and organizations, who made major donations to our work last year. The Sangha has drawn great strength from their generosity and vision. May the spirit of their gifts continue to live within our work and practice.

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Photos: In our Tree Bank project area, Manolo (right), helped our birders ford a forest stream in December. Riparian forest is critically important bird habitat there as here. Bill's bird: a Hispaniolan lizard cuckoo (*Saurothera longirostris*). A large forest bird endemic to the island, it preys on Hispaniola's extensive anole populations, hence its common name.



BIRDS OF THE TREE BANK

In December, Matt and I took a group of six expert birders down to our Tree Bank Hispaniola program area. The visit was a first step towards learning what bird species are using the Tree Bank’s forest-restoration sites.

The Tree Bank works along a section of the Dominican Republic / Haiti border, on the Dominican side, to boost small-holder farm incomes and conserve native forest. Currently, the program has about 60 sites covering some 290 acres and scattered over about 25 square miles. Every year, the site list expands.

Our birders were members of the Virginia Society of Ornithology; they all had a great deal of field experience, in various parts of the world, so we were confident that they could work in our program area. The team was organized by Lenny Bankester, VSO Vice President, a member of the Sangha, and one of our six visitors.

For the census, we chose three sites, each representative of a common scenario in our site inventory:

A Forest Credit Reserve. These are forest fragments in conservation easements. They have well developed canopy and usually enclose a stream.

A coffee grove. These also have well developed canopy but some branches are occasionally cut to admit more light for the coffee planted into the understory.

A forest planting. These are open areas planted with tree seedlings. The weeds are usually chopped to the ground a few times a year to make it easier for the trees to grow. Beans and other annual crops are

Photos: Top left, VSO birders, accompanied by Tree Bank Co-Directors Manolo Sanchez (foreground) and Cosme Quezada (center), check out a forest patch. Top right, a group shot of our birding team and three of our Dominican colleagues. That’s Lenny Bankester, VSO Vice President, with unpretentious VSO banner. On the far right, that’s Samali, daughter of our hostess Mari Geraldino. Both photos were taken in December. Bill’s birds: above, a narrow-billed tody (*Todus angustirostris*) and below, a broad-billed tody (*T. subulatus*). Both todies are endemic to the island. The broad-billed tody is more generalist in its habitat preferences and may have benefited from deforestation; the narrow-billed species is more of a forest specialist and is probably in decline.

often planted amidst the saplings for the first few years.

Of course, every native bird is a welcome sight, but we were especially interested in four categories, which overlap somewhat:

1. Migratory species. These overwinter on Hispaniola but fly up to the eastern United States to breed.
2. Endemic species. These are non-migratory species that occur naturally only on Hispaniola.
3. Species that are probably in decline. Some of these may still be common; others may be rare.
4. Species that are at risk of extinction.

Our birders divided themselves into three teams, and visited the three sample sites for three consecutive mornings. They recorded every bird that they saw or heard.

Here, in very abbreviated form, is what they found: 39 species in all, of which 11 are migratory, 10 are endemic, nine are probably in decline, and one, the white-necked crow (*Corvus leucognaphalus*), is listed as “vulnerable” (not yet endangered but close to it). We’ll post a complete set of findings on the Tree Bank page of our website.

We plan to make the census an annual event. Every year, we hope, VSO birders will visit this same set of sites. Their data should give us an increasingly detailed picture of how we are helping wildlife, and how we could do more.



The VSO data are a very valuable gift to the Tree Bank. There is no way that we could have collected this information on our own — and it will grow increasingly useful as more data are added, and as the Tree Bank itself continues to expand.

— Chris Bright, President



... continued from page 2:

There's another good reason for insisting that fieldwork come first: by conserving natural spaces, we are also helping to create a special kind of public space. Consider this: every year, about 600 people volunteer with the Sangha in the field, and we're just one group. There are thousands upon thousands of groups doing useful, hands-on environmental work in this country — on conservation, energy issues, pollution issues, agriculture, environmental justice, you name it. Many of these groups have volunteer bases, and I would guess that those volunteers, if they stay with the work for a few years, end up knowing far more about their issues, in practical terms, than do most federal politicians. Their work isn't turning them into ecologists or chemists, but it is teaching them about the practical matters of managing nasty, complicated problems.

These people almost inevitably become a kind of political resource. After months of honeysuckle control, who wouldn't welcome a grant program to help extend that control throughout the entire drainage? Or one that helps get the toxics out of the water that poor people have to drink? Or that funds the transition to solar power?

You might suspect a demographic flaw in this way of thinking: citizen involvement in environmental work is likely to be highest in urban or suburban areas, where politicians are already the most sympathetic to its aims. I would agree, but I'm hoping that we can find an opportunity here. Suppose each of us urban or suburban conservationists took the time to learn about just one of the many wonderful rural projects in our field, and maybe talk to a few of the people involved? Over the long term, such an effort might help us restore, not just our natural areas, but our political spaces as well.

— Chris Bright, President

Photo: In January, fledgling Eagle Scout Austin Hogeboom and Boy Scout Troop 1345 created this enormous soil bin at our Wild Plant Nursery, in Springfield, Virginia. That's Austin at about the center, in the orange sweatshirt. His bin is big enough to hold dump-truck loads of soil, which can then be managed better than soil loads dumped out in the open. The bin will help us conserve soil, keep it clear of weed seeds, and maintain proper levels of moisture. We're very grateful to Austin and friends for all the help!

The Earth Sangha is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) charity based in the Washington, DC, area and devoted to ecological restoration. We work in the spirit of Buddhist practice, but our members and volunteers come from a wide variety of religious and secular backgrounds.

Want to contact us or make a donation? You can support our work by becoming a member. Membership starts at \$35 per year. Donations are tax-deductible. You can mail us a check (made out to "Earth Sangha") or donate on our website. We will send you a receipt and include you in our mailings. (If your name and address are correct on your check, there is no need to send us anything else.) To donate specifically to our DC-Area programs, write "DC-Area" on the check memo line; to donate specifically to the Tree Bank, write "Tree Bank" on the memo line. [Contact us at: Earth Sangha, 10123 Commonwealth Blvd., Fairfax, VA 22032-2707 | \(703\) 764-4830 | earthsangha.org](mailto:info@earthsangha.org). Complete program information is available on our website.

Want to volunteer or meditate with us? We work with volunteers at our Wild Plant Nursery and our field sites in northern Virginia. We meditate in the Del Ray section of Alexandria on Tuesday evenings. For more information see our website or call Lisa Bright at (703) 764-4830.

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