Reconnaisance Report

WHITE BROOK WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

John S. Barclay*

Date of Visit:	29 December 2003	Time: 9:20 - 10:05 a.m.
Location:	99 Darby Road, from Barrett Hill Road, off Rte. 169, Brooklyn, Windham County, Connecticut.	
Owner:	Wolf Den Land Trust (WDLT)	
Purpose:	To develop a preliminary assessment of wildlife values and management	

Overview:
Land trust caretaker for the White Brook Sanctuary, Sara Putnam-Orcutt, accompanied me to the property. The White Brook Sanctuary is owned almost entirely by the WDLT, with an unmarked barbed wire fence boundary through the back portion. At the time of our visit the area had been flooded for some time by a sizeable beaver population. Ice covered the area but was unsafe to walk on thus most of the property was inaccessible. The WDLT is interested in determining the quality of the property for wildlife and recommendations for management.

Site Description:
The site consists of an extensive shallow fresh marsh with smaller areas of deep marsh, shrub swamp, wooded riparian edge and wooded knolls. A dilapidated (mill?) dam by Darby Road receives flow from several streams which appear to merge ~150-200 from the dam. Beaver have built a dam upon the original, raising the water level substantially but temporarily creating extensive wetland habitats which should benefit many other species as well. Established housing occurs close to the site, and new housing was under construction, also in close proximity. A trash dump was observed just off the property, a footing drain (?) appears to discharge from the nearest house into the wetland, and woody debris, leaves and lawn clippings appear to have been dumped on the property on a regular basis. Human use of the property, such as mowing, or cutting trees and shrubs near the property line, may occur. Invasive species noted on site include grackles, house sparrows, autumn olive, barberry, multiflora rosa, asiatic bittersweet, and phragmites. Woody plants having some wildlife value were red oak, white ash, red maple, red cedar, white pine, pitch pine (planted?), cherry sp., grape and cattail. Cattail is usually beneficial for wildlife if managed via water levels and muskrat populations. Other species were noted but are of minor value to wildlife.

Discussion:
The property in question appears to have the potential to be a high priority wetland for indigenous aquatic wildlife species, populations and habitats in Northeastern Connecticut. Relatively few wildlife species were noted but that is typical for this time of day and season. The marsh may have been created or expanded as a result of sedimentation from erosion upstream. Present conditions seem to be good but deteriorating and should be addressed if the property is to achieve its potential for the WDLT. The area is believed to be especially important for aquatic wildlife such as wetland song birds, ducks, rails, herons, beaver, muskrat, mink, otter and raccoon . The value of this area for fish per se was not determined on this visit but may be relatively minor due to the generally shallow nature of the marsh. Some (but not all) native amphibians, turtles and non-poisonous snakes probably do well, depending on levels of predation and human disturbance.

Recommendations:

1. Conduct an inventory of common plant and animal species observed on or immediately adjacent to the property. Include determinations of relative abundance and habitats used in each season. This should be augmented at least annually by observations from land trust members or visitors;

2. Establish contact with abutting owners and explain to them the purpose of the sanctuary and plans under consideration where appropriate. Invite their input, suggestions and cooperation in assisting WDLT management of the property. Some may not be interested but the effort should be made.

3. Ask for municipal, regional or Northeast District Health Department assistance for possible inspection of the site (re adjoining residential impacts if any) and review of town records to address possible public health and safety concerns and to verify boundaries;

4. Secure or prepare a set of aerial photographs and maps for the sanctuary such as topographic, land use/land cover, soils, wetlands and hydrology, and abutting properties. Contact the Green Valley Institute, the Quinnebaug/Shetucket Heritage Corridor office or the Center for Land Use Education and Research at UConn for assistance in preparing maps from existing data and satellite imagery;

5. Locate and clearly mark the boundary with WDLT markers or boundary paint at regular intervals; plastic flagging is a temporary measure at best;

6. Encourage gifts or purchases of portions of adjoining parcels or conservation easements which would improve WDLT management authority for the sanctuary and its perimeter;

7. Note activities and ownership upstream and in the watershed which could impact the sanctuary. Encourage other gifts to establish a riparian wildlife corridor along streams feeding into and out of the sanctuary which eventually could become contiguous to it;

8. Initiate and maintain a dedicated long term control program to minimize presence of invasive plants on the site. Red maple and juniper have some wildlife values but can become native invasives which may require control as well. Volunteer work teams with minimal instruction and supervision can be especially effective in this high priority activity;

9. Improve and landscape the access lane off Darby Road for safer access and parking of several vehicles. Install an identifying sign and any requirements for use and enjoyment of the sanctuary;

10. Remove some obstructing vegetation to create a safe vantage point for viewing the marsh from several locations. This can be an effective low cost improvement for increasing use and enjoyment of the sanctuary;

11. Clear access trails to points of interest on the property wherever feasible (and prudent) without jeopardizing special status species or important habitats. Mark trails with tree paint or small signs out of reach of vandals;

12. Contact the Natural History Database via CTDEP or The Nature Conservancy for determination of special status species which may already be known to occur in the area. This information need not be publicized but is important to consider before management activities are undertaken;

13. Based on what was observed in December, I recommend making aquatic wildlife, particularly ducks, the priority group for the sanctuary. There are relatively few large high quality freshwater marsh habitats in the state;

14. Emphasis on Wood Ducks and Black Ducks would be appropriate given the history and popularity of the two. Artificial nest structures for each species can be installed with predator guards and maintained best in winter with a safe ice cover present. Management to provide adequate brood cover will be important;

15. For aquatic wildlife management to be worthwhile in the long run, water levels need to be stabilized. Before any water control measures are implemented WDLT should consult with CTDEP Dam Safety (Hartford), the Natural Resources Conservation Service office in Brooklyn, and the CTDEP Wildlife Division office in Franklin;

16. Other organizations and agencies which have experience in similar management efforts could be contacted for information and possible assistance. They include Connecticut Waterfowlers, Ducks Unlimited, CT Chapter of The Nature Conservancy, Connecticut Audubon, the Brooklyn Conservation and Wetlands Commissions, and Wildlife Conservation Research Center, UConn;

17. Advanced planning is recommended relative to mute swans which are very destructive to marsh habitats, and aggressively drive out other species of wildlife. The increasing swan population in Connecticut is expanding its range inland from the coast, and this site may be potential habitat;

18. Mallards, Canada geese, white-tailed deer, beaver and muskrats also can create serious habitat destruction problems that respond well to management. Managing these population can achieve many management goals - however, artificially feeding wildlife should be discouraged;

19. The WDLT should consider that regulated hunting or trapping may be the only realistic management strategies for controlling nuisance wildlife or excessive populations on large areas. This can apply to many species in addition to those already referred to, e.g. snapping turtles.

20. Conduct a more thorough assessment of the species, habitats, and conditions of the sanctuary, including flagging all perimeter boundaries where verified. Consider use of student interns from the Natural Resources Department at the University of Connecticut to assist in the effort.

Summary:
The White Brook Wildlife Sanctuary has major potential as aquatic wildlife habitat if water level control is achieved. Recommended measures to achieve potential and sustain wildlife are relatively low cost and effective. Human activity and encroachment will become significant detractions to wildlife values of this site if not addressed. Cooperation of area property owners and others is important for the success of future management here. Good public relations, outreach and publicity can do much to achieve this goal.

Date Submitted: 9 March 2004 Hours donated: field & travel 2; report preparation 6; total 8.

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