

# 50 Years Keeping Delaware Wild

BY SARA KAPLANIAK • PHOTOS: DELAWARE WILD LANDS

TALK ABOUT PRESSURE. One of the first pieces of business waiting for Kate Hackett when she took the helm of Delaware Wild Lands, Inc. in February was to mark the organization's 50 years of conserving the First State's natural and cultural treasures. Since its founding in 1961, Delaware Wild Lands has played a pivotal role in protecting 30,000 acres of land throughout Delaware. Currently, the organization owns and manages more than 20,000 acres of land and several historic properties in New Castle, Kent and Sussex Counties.

"This makes Delaware Wild Lands the largest non-profit, non-governmental

landowner in Delaware," says Hackett with a humble grin. "I have the honor and the challenge of moving the organization forward in the same dedicated and creative spirit upon which it was founded."

## Love of the Landscape

Delaware Wild Lands emerged from the work of a few conservationists dedicated to raising funds for the acquisition of 80 acres adjacent to Trussum Pond near Laurel – a unique spot seemingly plucked from the Deep South and deposited into Sussex County. The purchase fueled a desire to do more.

The chance came in 1961 when Delaware Wild Lands, officially established as a non-profit land conservation organization, began acquiring land in New Castle County to thwart Shell Oil's efforts to establish a refinery. When Shell Oil gave up its plans for construction, Delaware Wild Lands acquired the company's holdings, including valuable salt marsh that protects the shoreline from flood and storm damage, filters streams and rivers, and nourishes birds, shellfish and other wildlife. To further fortify the salt marsh and other important coastal habitat, the nascent non-profit worked alongside then-Governor Russell Peterson to pass the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1971, which substantially limits industrial use of this valuable natural area.

Adds Hackett, "These actions laid important groundwork for working creatively to sustain wildlife habitat and ensure that Delaware's residents and visitors had natural places, open spaces and historic treasures to enjoy into the future."

Permanently protecting some of the state's coastal salt marsh set a tone for the projects Delaware Wild Lands would take on in the future. Over five decades, Delaware Wild Lands would continue to acquire key parcels of land to manage or sell to other conservation-minded organizations. Where it made sense, properties would accommodate hunting, trapping, agriculture, forestry, research and education.



Lone duck at Delaware Wild Lands' Kux Farm property in New Castle County.









**Trussom Pond: Delaware Wild Lands' first purchase, now owned by the state.**

### Milford Neck Momentum

It was a little bit of everything in Kent County's Milford Neck landscape, a patchwork of open spaces — beaches and dunes, tidal marshlands, freshwater wetlands, forests and farmland. In 1995, Delaware Wild Lands purchased 1,775 acres in Milford Neck, including about one and one-half miles of shoreline along the Delaware Bay.

Over the next decade, Delaware Wild Lands worked with DNREC's Division of Fish and Wildlife, The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Soil Conservation Service, and private groups

and individual landowners to protect the Milford Neck landscape with every conservation tool in their collective arsenals. These tools included direct ownership, conservation easements and North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) grants which provide funds to organizations and individuals who have developed partnerships to conserve wetlands vital to the livelihood of waterfowl and other migratory birds in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

"This was a remarkable time for Delaware Wild Lands since millions of migrating shorebirds traveling along the Atlantic Flyway visit Milford Neck each

year," says Porter Schutt, a member of the organization's Board of Trustees. "It also contains the only remaining forested area greater than 1,000 acres on the Delaware coast — a crucial spot for wildlife requiring large, fragmented blocks of habitat during their life cycles."

The result was nothing short of spectacular. In 1998, tracts of land acquired by Delaware Wild Lands, the state, and The Nature Conservancy were woven together to create the Milford Neck Conservation Area which permanently protects 10,000 contiguous acres, including nearly 10 miles of Delaware Bay shoreline.

Looking forward, Kate Hackett sees Milford Neck as a work in progress as Delaware, and the world, face different challenges, "With this collection of



**Careful selection and harvest of trees will make room for additional Atlantic white cedar and bald cypress plantings at the Cypress Swamp**

## Delaware Wild Lands Fifty Years of Conservation Milestones



*Preserving the agricultural way of life at Delaware Wild Lands' Sharp Farm property.*

### 1960s

DWL formed to protect the Trussom Pond/James Branch area.

DWL acquired the first 1,147 acres of its Great Cypress Swamp

holding and additional properties in Blackbird/Taylor's Bridge and Angola Neck in response to Shell Oil's intent to construct a refinery.

The Delaware Wildlife Federation, in cooperation with the National Wildlife Federation and Sears-Roebuck Foundation, bestowed DWL with its prestigious Conservation Organization Award and recognized founder and executive director, Edmund H. Harvey, as Conservationist of the Year.

### 1970s

DWL worked alongside former Governor Russell Peterson to pass of The Coastal Zone Management Act of 1971, which limits industrial use of Delaware's coastal zone.

Duck Creek Heritage Society recognized DWL for preserving and restoring the historic Hart House.

### 1980s

After Shell Oil abandoned plans to construct a refinery, DWL partnered with the state to acquire and permanently protect 2,700 acres of the company's key, pristine Bayshore property.



*Delaware Wild Lands' staff installing wood duck boxes at Delaware Wild Lands' Augustine Creek properties.*



parcels secured and protected, we now turn our focus to managing the landscape and ensuring it remains healthy for wildlife. This includes helping wildlife adapt successfully to changing conditions such as sea level rise, marsh migration and extreme weather events.”

### An Even Greater Cypress Swamp

In another part of the state, Delaware Wild Lands builds on half a century of

experience to conserve another collection of parcels comprising the 11,000-acre Great Cypress Swamp which straddles the state line with Maryland just west of Selbyville in southern Delaware. It’s the organization’s largest holding. During a new economic reality where public funds and private donations can be unpredictable, this work has required more creativity and dedication than ever.

Adds Schutt, “Only 50 years of expe-

rience could have prepared us to pursue a new organizational goal at the Great Cypress Swamp: ecological and financial sustainability.”

Delaware Wild Lands made its first acquisition of 1,147 acres at the Great Cypress Swamp in 1964, not long after the organization’s founding. Like at Milford Neck, Delaware Wild Lands worked with conservation partners over many years to piece together at least two dozen separate purchases that make up the impressive tract under protected status today.

“Our Great Cypress Swamp holding provides a snapshot of a 50,000-acre landscape once dominated by Atlantic white cedar and bald cypress,” says Peter Martin, an ecologist who has worked with Delaware Wild Lands for 36 years. “Over the course of history, settlers drained the bogs to create farmland and harvested the massive stands of trees for shingles, buckets and siding. Part of the property also contained a large pine plantation and pulp generation operation.”

According to Martin, the Great Cypress Swamp hosts a plethora of plant and animal life. It is the state’s largest freshwater wetland, and it forms the headwaters to both the Inland Bays and the Pocomoke River, which flows into the Chesapeake Bay. The Great Cypress Swamp also serves as an important filter



**Waterfowl taking flight along Delaware Bayshores property owned by Delaware Wild Lands.**

DWL purchased 1,775 acres and approximately one and one-half miles of Delaware Bay shoreline in Milford Neck.

The Delaware Nature Education Society honored DWL executive director Holger H. Harvey with its Natural Areas Preservation Award.

### 1990s

DWL received the Delaware Recreation and Parks Society’s Organization Award.

The Delaware Nature Society honored DWL executive director Holger H. Harvey with its Conservation Award for preserving lands at Milford Neck.

DWL joined with The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, the State of Delaware, and the federal government to permanently protect 10,000 contiguous acres at Milford Neck.



*A northeastern display of fall color at Delaware Wild Lands’ Sharp Farm property outside of Odessa.*

### 2000s

DWL acquired the 430-acre Sharp Farm to develop as a waterfowl refuge and initiated improvements to enhance nesting and foraging habitat on the site.

Delaware Ducks Unlimited honored DWL executive director Holger H. Harvey with its Conservationist of the Year Award.

DNREC recognized DWL ecologist Peter S. Martin with its Delaware Wetland Warrior Award for his exemplary efforts to protect wetlands and the benefits they provide to society.

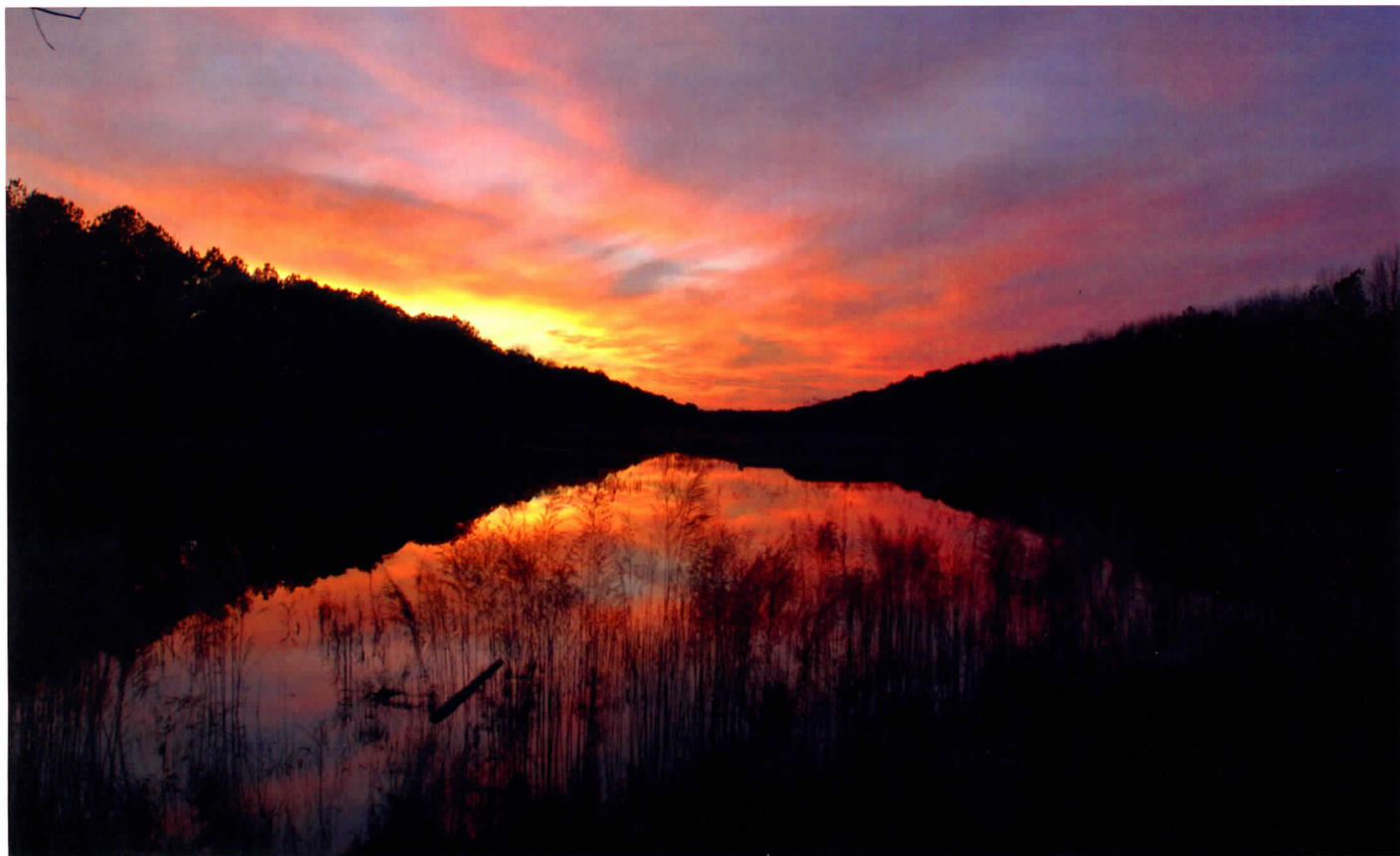
DWL initiated the development of a certified sustainable timber management plan for its Great Cypress Swamp property. The first sustainable

timber harvest made way for the planting of 50,000 native Atlantic white cedar and bald cypress seedlings and contributed to the local economy and restoration of the Roman Fisher Farm.



*First phase of the Roman Fisher Farm restoration project at the Cypress Swamp.*





Interior of the Cypress Swamp at sunset.

for surface and ground water, including the vast aquifer underlying its peaty soil.

Over the years, Delaware Wild Lands pursued many strategies for managing, restoring and enhancing its holdings in the Great Cypress Swamp. However, progress was slow-going in this complex ecological mosaic . . . until recently.

In 2005, the advent of sustainable forestry opened new doors for Delaware Wild Lands when it entered into an agreement with the forest management consulting firm, Vision Forestry, to develop a sustainable timber management plan for the Great Cypress Swamp property. The plan, which meets Sustainable Forestry Initiative certification guidelines, demarcates parts of the property as a sustainable, working forest while establishing zones for the preservation and enhancement of ecological diversity.

Adds Martin, "Developing this plan has been an evolutionary process involving a combination of historical data, field work and cutting-edge computer technologies that we hope will lead to a site dedicated to habitat restoration, scientific research and education."

A secondary benefit of this new plan will be a forestry operation that produces a small but sustainable supply of timber and wood products. Profits from these transactions will drive preservation and restoration activities at the Great Cypress Swamp property while also benefiting the local community and economy by creating demand for goods and services associated with Delaware Wild Lands' timber harvest and restoration activities.

"Our work at the Great Cypress Swamp represents a long-term forestry project that will protect and restore a sensitive ecosystem while generating recurring revenue for the organization," says Gene Bayard, long-time member of Delaware Wild Lands Board of Trustees. "It really takes the organization in a new and groundbreaking direction."

#### **Habitat, Humans and Heritage**

In time, revenue from the Great Cypress Swamp sustainable forestry operation will help bring the adjacent 25-acre Roman Fisher Farm back to life as a meeting facility, lodging for researchers and professional education center. It repre-

sents a strategy that if successful, holds promise for transforming Delaware Wild Lands' land protection and restoration efforts into a self-sustaining enterprise that accommodates human uses while benefiting wildlife and local communities.

And in a sense, it comes full circle.

"Our founders felt there should be a balance between restoring natural habitats, preserving cultural treasures and sustaining traditional uses of Delaware's landscape such as hunting, trapping, agriculture and forestry," says Kate Hackett. "Delaware Wild Lands' commitment to that vision remains undiminished, and we look forward to taking it to the next level by facilitating scientific research, fostering sound stewardship, and exploring the most effective management and restoration tools and technologies at all of the valuable properties entrusted to us."

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