

## Cape Cod Land Trusts: Shared Wildlife Conservation Planning

**Project Summary:** A scientific mapping and planning process identified priority parcels of wildlife habitat on Cape Cod for 25 cooperating land conservation organizations, many of which are all volunteer.

**Regional Setting:** Barnstable County, Massachusetts, known as Cape Cod, is one of the fastest-growing coastal counties in the nation. Its year-round population of 230,000 more than doubles during the summer tourist season. Suburban-style residential development and on-site wastewater disposal are the biggest threats to terrestrial and aquatic habitats.

**Land Trust Mission:** The mission of the Compact of Cape Cod Conservation Trusts is to increase the amount and quality of legally-protected habitats and open space on Cape Cod.

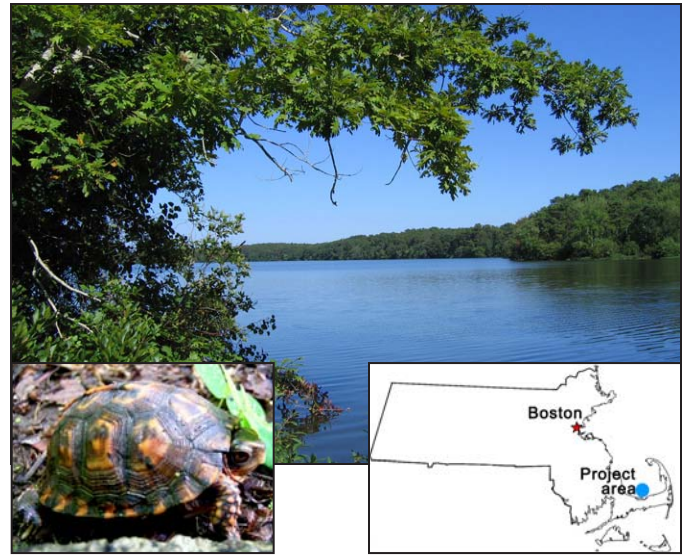
**Service Area:** Barnstable County, Massachusetts (Cape Cod).

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### Biodiversity Values

The recent Cape Cod Wildlife Conservation Project identified and mapped 32 native habitat types covering approximately 160,000 acres, or 61%, of Cape Cod's land area. Cape Cod's habitat diversity and number of rare wildlife species is disproportionately large compared to the state of Massachusetts. Four towns on Cape Cod are in the "top 10" in Massachusetts for the largest number of state-listed rare species records; the Town of Barnstable is one of only five towns in the state with more than 100 records of rare species.

Mixed pitch pine-oak woodland is the dominant community type on Cape Cod. The most important habitats for the protection of state-listed rare species are coastal plain pondshores, vernal pools, heaths and grasslands, barrier beaches and dune



**Photo:** Walkers Pond. **Inset:** Eastern box turtle.

systems. Fire suppression, development and natural succession have reduced these habitats dramatically.

### Conservation Strategy

The Compact of Cape Cod Conservation Trusts has several staff members who work with 25 local and regional land trusts and watershed associations on projects to acquire and manage natural areas as protected open space and wildlife habitat. Most of the local land trusts are run by volunteers, making the full-time staff support provided by the compact crucial to fulfilling land conservation and management goals.

On Cape Cod, wildlife habitat is highly fragmented due to development for residential, commercial, transportation and other land uses. The compact initiated the Cape Cod Wildlife Conservation Project to help bring wildlife conservation planning to the forefront in land acquisition and open space management efforts among Cape Cod's land trusts. The project goal was to preserve and enhance biodiversity on Cape Cod by identifying, mapping and ranking natural communities, including existing areas held for conservation or other open space purposes. The project mapped 27 distinct community types for more than 400 species to determine priority areas for protection and management. Project findings were shared broadly with town officials, conservation organizations and community leaders.

## Assistance for Small Land Trusts

The Compact of Cape Cod Conservation Trusts, Inc. was formed in 1986 as a non-profit to assist six volunteer-led land trusts on the Lower Cape. Today, the compact works with 25 local and regional land trusts and watershed associations assisting with the acquisition and management of important natural areas as protected open space. Cape Cod land trusts protect more than 5,700 acres of land.

Through the compact, land trust members have access to:

- A revolving loan and mini-grant fund for land acquisition and land management;
- Twenty hours of free staff assistance for specific projects and additional hours at significantly reduced rates; and
- Access to volunteer land stewardship assistance through Barnstable AmeriCorps-Cape Cod, which contracts with the compact for land stewardship services.

## Protecting High Priority Habitats

The collaborative Cape Cod Wildlife Conservation Project helped the following projects by prioritizing acquisition efforts and/or management decisions for local land trusts.

### Slough Road Woodlands, Brewster/Dennis

Interior blocks of woodland, away from the coastlines of Cape Cod, are the last places to be developed. In 2006, the Town of Brewster acquired two adjoining parcels to preserve 59 acres for \$4.25 million. Part of a 400-acre block identified as prime forest-interior habitat for breeding neotropical migratory songbirds by the Wildlife Conservation Society and the Audubon Society (Important Bird Areas), the land also includes freshwater pond shoreline and spawning grounds for anadromous fish. The parcels provide a wildlife corridor between 323 acres to the west and 900 acres to the east. Funding came from the municipality, the water district of the adjoining Town of Dennis and the state. A forthcoming land stewardship plan will include restoration ("undevelopment") of a nine-acre cultivated cranberry bog back to a wet woodland. Nearby Walkers Pond will no longer be used for bog irrigation. The compact negotiated transactions and arranged the funding for the project.

### Monomoy River, Harwich

In 2003, the Harwich Conservation Trust, a small land trust with 1.2 full-time staff, successfully led a campaign to raise \$2.4 million toward the Town of Harwich's \$5.9 million purchase of 42 acres on the Monomoy River. Part of a 120-acre assemblage, the half-mile riparian corridor was highly ranked in the Cape Cod Wildlife Conservation Plan for its forested neotropical migratory songbird habitat and for ground-nesting species, such as the

ovenbird and northern bobwhite quail. Eastern box turtles, a state-listed rare species, nest along the river banks. A land stewardship plan completed by the land trust for the Town of Harwich protects wildlife habitat and a nearby drinking water supply. Scenic walking paths are designed to minimize forest fragmentation. Barnstable County's AmeriCorps-Cape Cod and Homeward Bound (a state-funded program for first-time youth offenders) built the trails and benches.

### Sarah's Pond, Orleans

An eight-acre freshwater pond draining directly into Pleasant Bay, Cape Cod's largest estuary, has been a priority for the all-volunteer Orleans Conservation Trust since its founding in 1970. The trust has used a combination of land donations, conservation easements and bargain purchases to protect 116 acres around the pond, which represents almost 90% of the shoreline. A recent purchase of seven acres, for \$865,000, was reinforced by the Cape Cod Wildlife Conservation Plan. Birds that use the pond for fishing include osprey, bald eagle, sharp-shinned hawk and a colony of great blue herons. The Orleans Conservation Trust and Barnstable County's AmeriCorps-Cape Cod have restored a native wildflower meadow by removing invasive black locust trees at the edge of the pond.

## Looking Ahead

The Compact of Cape Cod Conservation Trusts has assisted its collaborating land trusts with numerous other studies that will help prioritize future protection and restoration efforts. These include:

- **Priority Ponds Project**, a look at the ownership and conservation values associated with the remaining undeveloped land surrounding Cape Cod's freshwater ponds. The project goals are to support acquisition and land management, and to provide the impetus for focused landowner outreach and education.
- **Take Back the Cape: Discovering Opportunities for Undevelopment**, which describes nine case studies in which towns and land trusts have restored blighted developed sites into natural areas and parks. Since its publication in 2001, ten additional natural areas have been reclaimed and restored by Cape Cod land trusts and towns.

## For More Information

- **Barnstable County AmeriCorps of Cape Cod:**  
[www.rdoac.org/ameriCorps](http://www.rdoac.org/ameriCorps)
- **Massachusetts Audubon Important Bird Area Program:**  
[www.massaudubon.org/Birds\\_&\\_Beyond/IBAs](http://www.massaudubon.org/Birds_&_Beyond/IBAs)