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Round Ball Mountain Conservation Area Master Plan

Town of Ancram, New York



February 20, 2010

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Purpose and Organization

This Master Plan has been created to guide the development and management of the Round Ball Mountain Conservation Area during the next five years. The Plan's purpose is threefold: to record existing site opportunities and constraints; to document the proposed program and site design; and to establish the management goals for the site.

Columbia Land Conservancy (CLC) Master Plans are also intended to be working documents that respond to changing conditions. The CLC staff and Board of Trustees have established a policy to review and update Management Plans after a maximum five-year period. Thus, this Plan will be reviewed in the year 2015, or as conditions dictate.

This Plan is organized into three parts:

- I. Site Context and Analysis
- II. Site Design
- III. Land Management

I. Site Context and Analysis

See also: *Location Map*, Exhibit I.a

Protected Lands Context Map, Exhibit I.b

Aerial Map, Exhibit I.c

Topography Map, Exhibit I.d

Soils Map, Exhibit I.e

Site Analysis Map, Exhibit I.f

Overall Description

The Round Ball Mountain Conservation Area (Round Ball) is a 105.62-acre wooded site located in the town of Ancram, at its southern limit at the Columbia/Dutchess County line. Ancram is in the southeast corner of Columbia County on the border with Massachusetts. Round Ball Mountain is located approximately one-half mile immediately west of State Route 22, on Carson Road, and approximately five miles from the Ancram hamlet and nine from the hamlet of Ancramdale. Round Ball Mountain is part of the Route 22 Taconic ridgeline corridor that includes Taconic State Park.

Round Ball is distinctive among CLC's public conservation areas for being largely bordered by protected lands. The property is bounded on the north and west by the Scotland Farm/Gilmore conservation easement and to the south by the Indian Ovens/Alcaly conservation easement. The conservation values of Round Ball Mountain are multiplied by the benefits of its location within a greater conservation "block" of contiguous properties that extends north over 5,000 acres and includes the Drowned Lands Swamp Conservation Area.

Views from the site look out to the Taconic ridgeline and the valley and wetlands complex below. Round Ball Mountain itself is visible from State Route 22, and Carson, Catalina and Over Mountain roads. The property has approximately 1,000 feet of road frontage on Carson Road.

Round Ball Mountain is located across State Route 22 from portions of Taconic State Park, and approximately six miles from the Drowned Lands Swamp Conservation Area to the north. The Harlem Valley Rail Trail runs north along the east side of State Route 22 opposite Round Ball Mountain. Although that section of the trail, Section 4, is still in development, built sections of the Harlem Valley Rail Trail can be accessed from the town of Millerton, approximately two miles south, and from Under Mountain Road in Ancram, approximately six miles north of the Round Ball Mountain Conservation Area.

Natural and Scenic Features

See also: *Rapid Ecological Assessment Form*, Appendix A

Preliminary Ecological Description. Farmscape Ecology Program, Appendix B

Round Ball Mountain primarily consists of deciduous upland forest habitats that are part of a larger continuous forested corridor along the west side of Route 22, continuing into Dutchess County. The summit of Round Ball Mountain plateaus at elevation 1318 feet. There are large areas of steep slopes ranging from 10% to 50% %, particularly on the southern and eastern portions of the site. Round Ball Mountain abuts areas of open farmland to the north/northwest and the southeast, and otherwise is surrounded by forest. Two un-named streams also extend along the northern and southern parcel boundaries and drain into a calcareous wetland that forms the Webatuck Creek, part of the Connecticut River watershed.

No wetlands appear on the property, however Round Ball Mountain is within a large watershed that is part of the Harlem Valley Calcareous Wetlands Complex covering three states. It is comprised of two smaller complexes, including the Northeast-Ancram fen complex of which Round Ball is a part.

Soils

The soils at Round Ball Mountain are mostly glacial till overlaying carbonate rocks. The predominant Nassau channery silt loam soils over more than half the site (see Soil Map,

Exhibit I.d) are acid, thin, rocky and excessively drained, and have little agricultural or even forestry value, which is reflected in the land use history of the site. There is a small area of prime agricultural soils in the extreme northwestern portion of the site. The size and species of trees and other flora found there are evidence that this area was reforested more recently than other portions of the site. There is a band of sand and gravel along the eastern property boundary and the soils along the creeks are generally deeper, which is evident in the tree growth in those sections of the site. There are a few small areas of calcareous outcrops on the southern slopes. Two cave-like formations have been identified there.

Habitats

According to the *Preliminary Ecological Report* prepared by the Farmscape Ecology Program, the plant communities observed on the site identify four different forest habitats including Mature Oak-Hickory Forest, Mature Early-Successional Forest, Mature Creek-side Forest, and Mesic Hardwood Forest. There are also patches of Non-Carbonate and Carbonate Crest, Ledge, and Talus habitats. Within the general homogeneity of the forest habitats, there are variations in quality based upon the soils, slopes and other site conditions.

Notable species in these habitats include, in the Mature Oak-Hickory Forest, dominant red oaks with an understory of Shadbush, Witch hazel and others, and acid-soil loving shrubs. Stump sprouts of American Chestnut are also evident.

The Mature Early-Successional Forest is in the area of prime farmland in the northwestern corner and shows mature stands of White Birch and the largest representation of invasive Barberry and Garlic Mustard. An existing perimeter trail demarcates this habitat from the Mature Oak-Hickory forest on its southern side.

The slope south from the summit plateau is the location of the Non-carbonate Crest, Ledge and Talus habitat, which hosts some plants not found elsewhere on the site including Yellow Wild Indigo, although no calcium-loving plants have been observed. The two known cave-like formations are in this vicinity. One larger opening is nearby the existing residence and was blocked off by the former landowners. The second formation, in the ground, is in the vicinity of where a house site had been identified, at the end of an unimproved track. This track will be improved as a trail in 2010. This cave-like formation has been fenced off for safety reasons.

The area of Mesic Hardwood Forest in the southeastern portion of the property is notable for having diverse spring ephemerals not found elsewhere on site, including a great many ferns. The calcareous outcrops found here host a regionally-rare Round-leaved Dogwood, and an orchid, Spotted Coralroot. There are profuse Tulip Trees in this location including one very prominent specimen.

The Mature Creek-side Forest habitats along the northern and southern boundaries of Round Ball Mountain exhibit more Maples than elsewhere on site, and the regionally-rare Leatherwood shrub was observed along the northern creek.

Notable observations of the fauna on site include the location of a Turkey Vulture nest on the upper southern slope, as well as Pileated Woodpecker, Wood thrush and other birds in the Mature Oak-Hickory Forest habitat. The *Preliminary Ecological Report* notes that since Round Ball Mountain is part of a much larger forest corridor, it may support interior-forest birds and animals with wide ranges, such as Coyote, Bobcat and Black Bear. The rocky ledges and cave-like formations are likely to provide shelter for Bats and other interesting mammals and amphibians. Large populations of Two-lined Salamanders have been observed in the two creeks.

Furthermore, a large portion of north and eastern portions of the site falls within the buffer zone identified by the New York Natural Heritage Program as an important Bog Turtle area, a federally-endangered species.

The Site Analysis Map, Exhibit I.e, identifies the habitat locations. The *Preliminary Ecological Report* includes a more detailed description of each habitat, including flora and fauna species lists.

Cultural History

The Round Ball Mountain property was purchased through a bargain sale transaction in 2008 with assistance from private donors and a grant from the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. The prior owners, the Kitchen family from Connecticut, used the property seasonally for several decades. Now two of their children make Columbia County their permanent homes and are raising their own families here.

Documents provided to the local historical society by a neighbor, Mr. George MacPherson, provide a glimpse into the history of Round Ball Mountain from the early years of the 20th century. Mr. MacPherson first visited the area around 1905 and bought a nearby property, "Chestnut Hill Farm," in 1923. He recalled an old hay barn on Carson Road, the old Boucher farm tenant house (eventually the Bishop, and then the Carson residence) and what was then called "Cave Hill," adjacent to the Indian Oven easement property. He said that at that time, the Tator farm was located on top of Round Ball Mountain.

Mr. MacPherson recalled that around 1912, Round Ball Mountain was cleared for lumber. This may also have been done for charcoal, which was common practice in the area. One member of the Kitchen family also commented that the property had been logged for charcoal in the early part of the century. Mr. MacPherson remembered the crashing of trees being felled and then plummeting down the hill via a long chute. Prior to the logging, there were chestnut trees growing to as large as six feet in diameter, with bushel baskets of nuts harvested. Today, stump sprouts of chestnut trees are still found in some areas of the property.

According to Mr. MacPherson, fences typical in this landscape were made of either stone or stone with chestnut rails. The broad clearings, including the top of Round Ball Mountain, were cultivated in corn, rye and buckwheat.

Mr. MacPherson recalled plentiful bobwhite and pheasant, hawks, owls, foxes and rabbits, whereas the deer population was practically extinct. Six to ten-inch trout were commonly caught in both the north and south streams on the Round Ball Mountain property. By the 1940's, aerial photographs show a closed-canopy, deciduous forest throughout the property.

Existing Structures and Recent Use

Round Ball Mountain is reached by a dirt driveway entered from the north side of Carson Road. The driveway climbs almost halfway to the summit plateau and terminates at an existing residential site. There are two structures on the site that were formerly occupied by the owner family. One is a two-bedroom residence. The other is a five-room accessory building, a former modular schoolhouse that was moved to the site. These structures were used seasonally. Upon taking ownership of the site, CLC used the house for staff housing. A family now rents the house on a month-to-month lease. The accessory building has substantial mold problems and only the porch is currently in use by the tenant family for storage.

There are existing trails on site that will continue to be used as the public trail system. All existing trails are in good condition:

- A 1.4-mile perimeter trail branches off from the existing driveway to both the north and the southeast, circling the site and running along the two creeks.
 - A .2-mile summit trail branches off from the perimeter trail uphill from the residential area, and circles the upper plateau.
 - A small spur trail on the northern portion of the site branches off from the perimeter trail to the creek. (A return trail was cut back to the perimeter trail in 2009, creating a complete loop.)
 - On the southern portion of the site, the perimeter trail terminates at a point where an unimproved track intersects the existing driveway. That track extends eastward from the driveway to a former building site where there is evidence of several percolation tests. (This will be improved as a permanent trail in Phase II/2010, see below.)
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II. Site Design

See also: *Site Plan*, Exhibit II.a

Overall Design Concepts

1. Provide for year-round passive recreation opportunities. The site trails follow a range of terrain from moderate to steep slopes. The proposed Phase II trail section offers the option for a shorter trail loop over milder terrain. The site is best suited for year-round hiking as well as snow-shoeing, bird watching and nature study. Round Ball Mountain is occasionally used by local equestrians. With its terrain, well-drained trails, its outlying location in the county, and proximity to equestrians, Round Ball Mountain is better suited for that activity than most other CLC public conservation areas.
2. Focus education programming on site opportunities. Because of its location in the County, its challenging terrain and limited vehicular access and parking, Round Ball Mountain is not a favorable setting for environmental education programs with school groups. Programming should be focused on small group programs, for all ages.
3. Take this opportunity to educate about the benefit of conservation blocks. Round Ball Mountain is situated within a much larger contiguous forested habitat, which makes it likely to support interior species that abandon more fragmented landscapes. Along with that, it is part of an extensive conservation block that includes adjacent easement properties. CLC can use this to advantage in site interpretation and education to inform the public about the benefits for biodiversity of maintaining unfragmented landscapes. Protected lands within the two viewsheds should be identified with site signage (omitting owner names.)

Proposed Site Uses

Recreational Uses. Non-motorized recreation, e.g.

- Walking, hiking
- Snow-shoeing
- Cross-country running
- Birding
- Equestrian use
- Hunting (by CLC approved monitors only)

Educational Uses. Small group adult, youth and children's programs, e.g.

- Nature study and wildlife observation: winter ecology, spring ephemerals, forest habitats

- Conservation education
- Water quality testing

Specific Design Proposals

Site Access

The property has an existing driveway off of the northern side Carson Road that will continue to be used for public visitors as well as for residential tenant access.

In 2009, CLC undertook the following site improvements in order to officially open the site:

- A six-car parking area was created where the existing perimeter trail and unimproved track intersect, east of the existing driveway. The improvements consist of a base of coarse stone topped by a compacted “Item 4” top course. Ferns removed to prepare for construction were transplanted in order to naturalize the parking area.
- Split-rail fencing was installed at drop-off areas along the main driveway and at the entrance into the parking area.
- A gate demarcates the limit of public vehicular access, while permitting access to the residential area for CLC staff and tenants, as well as pedestrian access by visitors using the perimeter trail. Signage and fencing demarcate the private residential area where the trail passes.

Trails

The existing site trails will continue to be used for the public trail system. Improvements to these trails undertaken in 2009 include:

- A return trail was cut from an existing spur to the creek (Blue Trail) along the northern boundary of the site. It creates a complete loop to and from the creek, where a dedicated bench is located.
- The site trailhead was established east of the new parking area. It is marked by a pedestrian portal, alongside a donor bench. The trailhead consists of an Information Kiosk placed at the intersection of the existing perimeter trail (Green Trail) and the unimproved track.

During 2010, this track will be improved and continue as a trail (Yellow Trail) around the south and east slopes of Round Ball Mountain, where it will link again to the perimeter trail. It will offer a more moderate hike option over the perimeter trail, passing through a handsome tunnel of white birch. From its southeastern most point, this trail will offer views to the Taconic ridgeline and the farm and wetland areas on its lower slopes. A viewpoint will be established there with a bench and interpretive signage (2011). A future

option is to cut a cross trail from the lower, creek side perimeter trail up to the Yellow Trail and the viewpoint, offering a shorter loop trail option.

Trail blockers have been installed in two locations and should be maintained. They deter access by the general public in the following locations:

- At the residential area where the summit trail passes, and
- On the northwestern most portion of the summit trail, where a pre-existing trail runs northwest to an adjacent property.

Views

There are two major viewing opportunities on site: the summit viewpoint and a new viewpoint on the proposed Yellow Trail (2010). Some extensive pruning and thinning may be needed in order to keep these views open. Staff will monitor these locations over the next year to determine the extent and nature of work needed. Some work may require contracting with a professional arborist, when the budget permits

Site Elements

In addition to the trailhead improvements and bench locations already implemented, staff have identified three additional bench locations, including one along the long stretch of perimeter trail on the north/northwest portion of the site; one at the new Yellow Trail overlook; and a third to be determined. Staff will assess how the public tends to use the site over the next year to determine other improvements. A picnic table at the summit might be a good addition. A native shrub will be planted in Spring 2010 at the Red Trail overlook in memory of Evelyn Kitchen, alongside a bench, already installed and donated in honor of the Kitchen family (former owners).

Other site elements already implemented are detailed under **Existing Structures and Recent Uses**, and **Site Access**.

Interpretive Content and Signage

Site identity and informational signs were installed in 2009 in preparation for the site opening. These include:

- The Round Ball Mountain Public Conservation Area site sign, with an illustration of a Pileated Woodpecker. It is installed on the east side of the driveway where it meets Carson Road.
- The sign acknowledging support from the State Environmental Protection Fund was moved to the parking area.
- Signage was added at the existing driveway gate demarcating the limit of vehicular traffic and the residential zone.

In addition, Round Ball Mountain, nearly surrounded by private protected lands, within the viewshed of public lands, and set within a large forested corridor, offers an opportunity to inform the public about the benefits of such “conservation blocks.” Staff have identified the two overlooks as good locations for interpretive signage that describes those views and explains the benefits of protecting large, contiguous blocks of land and habitats. This work will be budgeted for 2011.

Design Language

The design of site elements is consistent with those at other CLC-owned public conservation areas in order to establish a consistent site and stewardship identity. This includes using locally-harvested, rustic Eastern Red Cedar for pole-mounted signs, the Information Kiosk and pedestrian portal. Split-rail fencing is used to demarcate areas such as ditch drop-offs, as well as trail blockers. Benches are of rustic construction using Cedar, with embedded dedication markers. Trails are unimproved except for initial clearing and grubbing to a six-foot width and ongoing maintenance to maintain clearance.

III. Land Management

See also: *Land Management Map*, Exhibit III.a

Overall Management Goals

- Provide for habitat protection along with public access.
- Focus improvements and programming on this site’s particular opportunities.
- Partner with others to achieve management and programming objectives, e.g. Farmscape Ecology Program, etc.
- Maintain tenant privacy in balance with the goal of public access.

Natural Resources Management Objectives

- Conduct work and provide for public access while protecting the steep slopes and thin soils from erosion.
- Limit and monitor impacts to the Bog Turtle buffer area, with expert consultation if needed.
- Determine ways to monitor habitats and species areas, per the ecological inventory provided by the Farmscape Ecology Program. Look for opportunities to fund further species surveys.
- Set priorities for invasives control in consultation with the Farmscape Ecology Program. Begin with Phragmites removal along Phase II/Yellow Trail in 2010.
- Locate and protect access to cave/sinkhole locations. Consult with geologists and other local experts.

Public Access Management Objectives

- Provide clear and well-placed signage and information to trail users.
- Maintain trail-blockers to deter access to private lands and the on-site residence.
- Post signage to maintain tenant privacy.
- Regularly monitor the effectiveness of these measures.
- Partner with local volunteers for maintenance and monitoring.

Constructed Features Management Objectives

Residential Structures

- Consider retrofitting the schoolhouse for seasonal use only as an educational facility. Continue to consider other ideas and opportunities.
- Continue to consider options and opportunities for the tenant house.
- Monitor functioning of swale to divert water from residential structures.

Entrance and parking

- Maintain site sign, kiosk and maps, other built elements.
- Monitor road and parking lot conditions seasonally and make repairs promptly.
- Maintain guardrail fencing for safety.
- Install highway sign on State Route 22.

Site Elements

- Monitor site use over the first year to assess needs and plans.
- Market bench dedication opportunity for (3) benches.
- Monitor condition of all elements and repair promptly.
- Install and maintain interpretive signage (2) at viewpoint areas (2011).

Trails

- Monitor trails at least monthly.
- Maintain minimum clearance (hand work with once yearly brush hogging) and monitor for washouts.
- Install stone, water bars, or other measures promptly if needed.
- Trim/maintain bench areas.
- Trim/maintain view areas at summit and the Phase II/Yellow Trail. Contract with arborist if needed.
- Maintain a trail log at the information kiosk.

