

OOMS CONSERVATION AREA AT SUTHERLAND POND

Chatham, New York

Proposal for Columbia Land Conservancy Master Plan Update

September 30, 2013

Purpose

Columbia Land Conservancy is conducting a five-year review and update of the Master Plan for the Ooms Conservation Area at Sutherland Pond. This document outlines a set of preliminary proposals to be considered for the updated plan and provides background information on the property.

The purpose of master planning is to document the site analysis, site plan, and management goals for a public conservation area. The plan is intended to guide the management and improvement of the property over a five to ten year period. To allow for flexibility and revision over time, plans are reviewed about once every five years and updated as necessary. This is the first review and update for this conservation area.

Overview

The first Master Plan for the Ooms Conservation Area at Sutherland Pond (Ooms) was adopted in June 2004. The property was then owned by the Open Space Conservancy, an affiliate of the Open Space Institute (OSI), and managed by the Columbia Land Conservancy for passive (i.e. non-motorized) public recreation, wildlife management, and education. The plan recommendations addressed improvements needed to provide for public access, including parking and trails, and it established land management goals and objectives. The plan also documented the site's history and natural features, and described the major habitats.

After almost a decade of experience managing Ooms, most of the original recommendations have been implemented and the overall design concepts and management goals are still appropriate. The matrix on pages 4 and 5 compares the 2004 objectives with the 2013 staff recommendations. Staff have recommended a short list of priority improvements and repairs, summarized below, in addition to more routine maintenance and management items.

Priority Improvements & Repairs

- Brushhog the meadow areas adjacent to the parking lot and maintain a regular mowing cycle there (e.g. every three years).
- Remove the failing and non-essential handrail (oak posts and handrail) on the side of the boardwalk and make cosmetic improvements as needed.
- Open up and maintain views from the boardwalk deck to the pond.
- Trim vegetation for eastern and western views from the Gazebo.
- Install a bench at the existing hedgerow cut on the southern portion of the site, where there are no benches, for viewing the wet meadow and Ooms family farm.
- Remove the old pump house from the eastern edge of the pond.

Background Information

Overall Description

The 180-acre Ooms Conservation Area at Sutherland Pond is one of Columbia Land Conservancy's (CLC) most popular sites. It is located in the Town of Chatham, just outside the Village of Chatham, in the north central portion of Columbia County. It is accessible from Rock City Road. Ooms is named for the Ooms family, which has farmed the land since the 1950's. It is an especially scenic, pastoral landscape with wide views and both grassland and water habitats that attract a diversity of bird species.

The property includes a 35-acre pond that comes into view on arrival at the parking area. The pond was enlarged in the 1960's with a man-made dam and is surrounded on its south and east sides by wet meadows. There is a smaller wetland on the southern portion of the property with an outlet stream that eventually empties into the Stony Kill. The pond is surrounded on three sides by approximately 120 acres of grasslands, which are still being hayed. Hedgerows crossing the grasslands mark the locations of a few small streams and drainage-ways. Along with the bordering woodlands, these provide rich food sources for wildlife. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which provided some of the original acquisition funding, has identified threatened and special concern species there. The pond is on the migration route of many migratory geese and ducks, and the property supports a large number of Bobolinks and other birds listed as "High Priority" on the National Audubon Watch List. Ooms is recognized as a location for viewing migratory birds in the volume Where to Find Birds in New York State.

Site History

Sutherland Pond is named after the Sutherland family who, up until the 1940's, lived in the farmhouse that still stands opposite the conservation area on Rock City Road. The Ooms family purchased the property from later owners in 1951 after emigrating from the Netherlands, and began their dairy operation there. Over time they acquired other land in the area as well, and today they farm as much as 1500 acres, including the neighboring family farm on Hartigan Road. The pond has long been a popular public fishing site. The Ooms family also let it be used as an informal community swimming place in the 1970's. The land was previously hunted, including by the Old Chatham Hunt Club, although hunting is not permitted today.

CLC partnered with the Open Space Conservancy to protect the land when the possibility of its sale arose more than a decade ago. OSI purchased the property from the Ooms family with a combination of its own funds and funds raised from private foundations and individuals. A stewardship endowment was also raised. In February 2013, OSI conveyed the property to CLC, subject to a conservation easement held by them. They also transferred the endowment funds they still held to CLC. Abutting the property to the north is a 15.5 acre property that was protected with a conservation easement as part of this project and also held by the Open Space Conservancy.

Assessment of Master Plan Goals & Objectives

The overall management goals identified in the 2004 master plan have guided development of the site as a public conservation area. For the most part, these are still valid guidelines.

1. Protect and manage for the diverse natural resources, wildlife habitat, and rural open space of the Ooms Conservation Area at Sutherland Pond while providing public access to the pond, grasslands, wetlands and other distinct habitats of this place.
2. Provide gathering places, trails and places for appropriate passive recreation.
3. Foster a land and water stewardship ethic by providing locations for environmental educational opportunities.
4. To the extent possible, given the above-mentioned goals and CLC's limited financial resources to manage the site, protect the biological communities that occur on the property.
5. Provide habitat for declining northeast grassland bird species.
6. Gradually phase out active haying of the fields to allow for grassland bird habitat.

The 2004 Plan also identified specific recommendations, shown in the matrix that follows. Some of these have been implemented and others continue to be relevant. Staff have adjusted or added recommendations based upon more recent observations.

2004 RECOMMENDATIONS

2013 RECOMMENDATIONS

Access & Entry Recommendations

1. Create a parking area and visitor entrance off of Rock City Road with Kiosk and map	Complete
2. Maintain secondary pull-offs on Rock City Road to allow fishermen to launch small, hand-carried non-motorized boats.	Complete
3. Work with Town of Chatham to eliminate or improve sight line issues at existing secondary pull-offs on Rock City Road.	Staff will continue to monitor whether privacy vegetation along the road can be trimmed to improve sight lines while maintaining a visual buffer for neighboring properties.
4. Maintain vehicular access for emergencies, maintenance and mowing equipment to fields.	Complete. There are two access points that staff use.
	Remove japanese knotweed from along Rock City Road, coordinating with Town of Chatham.
	Brush-hog and begin mowing cycle for meadow areas adjacent to parking lots.
Trails	
5. Create a loop trail; develop long and short trails (suitable for different activities) Site trails to capture views, create destination points, leaving large areas of habitat undisturbed.	Complete, no new trails should be built.
Constructed Features	
6. Provide picnic areas on the north edge of the pond and overlook benches periodically.	Complete. Bench locations are recommended at a hedgerow opening in the southern portion of the site and along the new pond loop trail. Other locations can be considered if there are requests for donated benches. Some benches need resetting or repair. Staff need to consider a policy for how to handle donated benches that need replacement.
7. Locate a rustic gazebo at the property high point.	Complete. Staff recommend trimming vegetation on the east and west sides of the gazebo to open up views.
8. Locate bird blinds around the pond.	No longer recommended. An osprey box was installed in 2012.

9. Locate boardwalks to cross wetland areas around pond edge.	Complete. A large area of boardwalk is installed around the northwest side of the pond. Staff have determined that the non-essential handrail there should be removed as it is in poor condition. Views from an adjacent deck are obscured by vegetation, which should be cleared. Bog bridging and small plank bridges have been installed along the northern pond edge, at Rock City Road.
	Staff recommend evaluating and removing pump house by the pond.
Interpretive Signage & Content	
10. Interpretive content was recommended for the wetland and grassland habitat and their species. It was also recommended to explain how farming and habitat can co-exist.	Staff have determined that other Public Conservation areas are a higher priority for interpretive signage at this time.
Management	
11. Inventory flora & fauna; monitor & control invasives; re-establish native species.	Staff agree that this is important as funding is available.
12. Phase in mowing open fields only after second fledgling season. Rotate field mowing on a 3-5 year schedule; disk & re-seed fields as funding permits	CLC has worked with the farmers to establish a modified haying schedule, that allows for high nesting success while maintaining productive hay lands. There are no plans to rotate mowing on a multi-year schedule, or to disk & re-seed fields.
Site Uses	
13. Schedule group uses to not conflict with habitat needs.	Ongoing
14. Create overflow parking area for events.	Complete; a lower parking area was built to accommodate additional parking.
15. Clearly post boundaries with adjacent properties.	Complete
16. Provide recreation and education programs	Ongoing