

Helen W. Buckner Memorial Preserve at Bald Mountain
The Crown Jewel of The Nature Conservancy in Vermont



Protecting nature. Preserving life.

Location: West Haven

Size: 3,791 acres Conservancy owned; 51 acres under conservation easement

Features of Note: Home to 8 rare natural communities, 30 rare plant species, and 29 rare animal species, including eastern whip-poor-wills, timber rattlesnakes, and the 5-lined skink, Vermont's only lizard. The largest known population of winged warblers in New England. The largest assemblage of freshwater mussels in New England.

Access: Three Conservancy trails, totaling 6.3 miles, traverse rugged uplands; easy rambles edge open hayfields; adjacent state boat ramp and informal canoe put-ins on the Lower Poultney River. Hunting with permission. If you visit this area, please wear boots and long pants and watch out for snakes. Visitors during hunting season (the month of May and October 1-December 31) should wear bright-colored clothing. Brochures are available at trail kiosks. No facilities.

An isolated peninsula tucked between the southern end of Lake Champlain and the lower Poultney River, Helen W. Buckner Natural Area is one of TNC's most diverse natural areas. Its lower clayplain forest, pasture lands, and talus slopes and cliffs of Bald Mountain are home to peregrine falcons, rare snakes, and Vermont's only lizard. For millennia, it's been an important place for humans, too.

An Aboriginal Presence

The Natural Area sits on the shared lands of the Mohican and Western Abenaki peoples. Long ago, Native Americans came to the area around Bald Mountain to hunt, fish, and gather wild edibles from the clayplain forest and the rich waters of Lake Champlain and the Poultney River.

Archeological digs by students and instructors at Castleton State University have turned up arrowheads, scrapers, cutting tools, and flakes from toolmaking dating back as far as 11,000 years. They also found French and Spanish coins dating back to early European settlement. The first permanent European settlers on the site arrived around 1790 to farm and log the land. A succession of owners followed, including the Galick family, which raised livestock, farmed mink, sugared, and logged 1500 acres starting in 1918.



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Isolation and A Chance Discovery

Despite the presence of early visitors, the geographic location of the area kept it largely isolated from development. Well into the 20th Century, the west side of the peninsula was effectively roadless, and until the Galicks built a road along Lake Champlain in 1934, they took their crops to market in nearby Whitehall, NY by boat. While isolation likely proved problematic for the Galicks, it helped

protect rare populations of plants and animals that lived in the area. One animal in particular drew the attention of scientists, eventually leading to efforts to protect the land around Bald Mountain.

In 1981, while exploring the basement of Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology, TNC scientist Marc DesMueles made an interesting discovery. Bottled in formaldehyde were two specimens of a lizard called the five-lined skink, collected by amateur naturalist Kinsman Lyon near Bald Mountain in 1962. DesMueles traced the specimens to the Galick Farm, where living skinks were also found. The find extended the known northern range of the skink into Vermont, and gave the state something it was never before known to have: a native lizard.

An "Ecological Gold Mine"

The discovery of the five-lined skink led to further exploration of Galick Farm. And according to Marc DesMueles, what scientists found there was "an ecological gold mine." Peregrine falcons nested on cliffs that towered over the landscape. Timber rattlesnakes, which had been hunted to near extirpation in Vermont, denned on Bald Mountain's rocky slopes. And that was just the beginning of the site's rich diversity.

All told, over 20 natural communities can be found on the site. Some 29 rare animal species live there. Lake Champlain and the Poultney River serve as nesting and feeding grounds for birds including bald eagles, osprey, and great blue herons. The lower Poultney River is home to 12 species of freshwater mussels, including seven Vermont-listed that are threatened or endangered. In addition, Helen W. Buckner Memorial Natural Area is the nesting site of New England's largest population of winged warblers.

TNC's efforts to protect the Buckner area began in the late 1980s, following thorough biodiversity surveys. In 1989, we purchased Galick Farm, a move enthusiastically supported by the Galick family. In an interview in *Vermont Life* magazine in 1992, 90-year-old Tony Galick explained why. "You can't find another place like this in the whole state," Galick said. "I'd rather see it left as is, and let other people come and enjoy it."

Since 1989, TNC has expanded the Buckner natural area through a series of easements and acquisitions funded by generous donors. Today, we scientifically manage nearly 4,000 acres for ecological diversity, control of invasive plants, and a variety of human activities. More than 6 miles of trails welcome hikers to explore natural communities from the wetlands along the Poultney River to the heights of Bald Mountain. A small section of the area is restricted from hiking to protect rattlesnakes and nesting peregrines. An unimproved boat launch, on the adjacent Ward Marsh Wildlife Management Area, allows paddlers and fishers access to the curving reaches of the slow-moving lower Poultney River and the southern shore of Lake Champlain. Hunters are also welcome during hunting seasons, although they must obtain permission first.

The Helen W. Buckner Memorial Natural Area is a fantastic example of how scientific management and personal generosity can combine to provide a rich natural resource for plants, animals, and humans alike.

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— Tony Galick, 1992

For More information, Please contact Murray McHugh, Southern Vermont Critical Lands Manager, at mmchugh@tnc.org or 802-287-6877x108.