

# Quincy Bog Notes

Conserving Land, Connecting People with Nature

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## Conservation Burial: A New Strategy for Protecting Land That's as Old as the Hills

Lee Webster

*"I would request that my body in death be buried... so that the energy content contained within it gets returned to the earth, so that flora and fauna can dine upon it, just as I have dined upon flora and fauna during my lifetime... For me, that is the cycle of life... That is not nothing. That is everything."*

—Neil DeGrasse Tyson

When someone hears about green, or natural, burial for the first time – say, at a cocktail party – a series of complex expressions usually appear on their face in waves – bafflement, rejection, amusement, curiosity, panic – depending on whether they've decided to lean in or head back to the drinks table at a trot. Unlike some strategies for building interest in land conservation, natural burial takes time to explain and needs the right moment. Perhaps yours is now.



A view of Owl's Head cliff from a natural burial ground in Benton Flats, NH

### Body Care/Planet Care Aversion

The first thing to acknowledge is a generational disconnect between how we care for our dead and how we care for the planet. While natural burial is ecologically friendly, there is a lot of learned behavior and innate human fear to resolve before proceeding with this remarkable solution to body disposition and perpetual land protection.

We are accustomed to death rituals that seem out of our control, literally out of our hands and in the hands of professionals. We assume that embalming, metal caskets, and concrete vaults are legally required and in the interest of public health and safety. Not only are they not legally required, or of any benefit to public health, they are directly detrimental to the ecosystems we rely on for wellbeing. People are often stunned to learn that we never lost the fundamental right to care for our own dead. We just unlearned how to do it.

Once, it was normal to be buried on the family's land without anything to slow the wonderfully efficient, aerobic decomposition of our organic selves. We replaced this ritual with complicated, resource-consuming, physically-distancing, carbon-emitting processes and products that contribute to land and soil damage. Vaults in conventional lawn cemeteries emit a significant percentage of total carbon emissions from concrete. They also create anaerobic, microbial dead zones in soil, often contaminating areas nearby with a "cemetery plume". These ceme-

teries are full of land unusable for any other purpose, paid for by property and other municipal taxes.

Other options include incomplete cremation, including flame cremation, alkaline hydrolysis, and human composting. These all use significant natural resources while resulting in leftover material that still needs management.

### Natural Burial: Nature, Science, and Cultural Engagement

After nearly 30 years of experience with renewed techniques of natural burial, we've learned that people choose it to engage with nature, to become part of the ecosphere that nurtured them in life, and to draw others into an awareness of Earth's fragility and strength. Natural cemeteries can be a vehicle for transformative personal and community experiences. These include direct participation before and during a funeral but also ongoing opportunities for life-affirming activities, such as birdwatching, hiking, weddings, baptisms, family picnic days, community educational events, research opportunities, and much more.

Natural burial is scientifically logical, with the sequestration of at least 25 pounds of carbon per person. If natural burial was implemented, rather than cremation, nearly 140,000 pounds of carbon would be sequestered every year in NH alone, instead of emitting over 14 million pounds of carbon dioxide.

Natural burial uses plant-based, renewable and decomposable materials for shrouds and caskets, including linen, cotton, wool, hemp, pine, and willow rather than carcinogenic, formaldehyde-based chemical treatment of the body prior to burial.

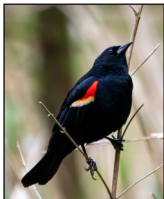
There are common fears around stripping away the expected cultural practices of embalming and vaults. Here are the top five:

- **Animal disturbances:** Natural burial depths, down to 4 feet (the legal norm in all but two states), are below the 18-24 inch smell distance that makes animal disturbance a possibility. Occasional skunks may visit the site looking for grubs in freshly turned soil, but this is well above the body.
- **Water safety:** Hydrologists and forensic scientists agree that the nitrate load in a full natural burial ground (typically 1/4 to 1/3 the capacity of a vault cemetery), is safe for preserving nearby water quality. A typical acre of agricultural land produces 100 times more nitrates than one burial, while a household of four will flush 200-400 times more nitrates than a single body releases over the entire time of burial.
- **Metal:** The metals involved with joint replacements are non-leaching and stable, unlike most metals used in conventional caskets. We leave them in place.
- **Pathogens:** When contagion or infection is involved, most pathogens die when their host dies. Rare exceptions include Hepatitis B, which can be contagious up to seven days after death. World health authorities unanimously agree that burial is the safest disposal method for human beings.
- **Winter burial:** The choice to, or not to, open ground in winter is made by each cemetery. Natural burial grounds bury year-round.

(Continued on page 4)

## President's Perspective: Behind the Scenes

Marguerite St. Laurent-Crowell



Lengthy discussions at our most recent Board of Directors meeting led to an almost three-hour meeting. That was after tabling several agenda items due to time constraints! If you're curious about the kinds of matters that occupy our attention at Board meetings, these examples will give you a flavor.

One discussion topic involved a parcel of land donated to the Town of Plymouth to be protected by the Plymouth Conservation Commission. The town had recently considered selling the property to an interested neighbor. In the end, the Select Board decided not to sell. The reason was that the donors of the land wrote a letter emphasizing their wish that the parcel stay with the Town of Plymouth, as they originally intended. This led our own Pemi-Baker Land Trust Committee to realize that we should ask landowners (and in some cases their descendants) to provide us with statements expressing the original intentions of putting their properties into easements. Even though we only hold the easements, our land trust keeps notes of discussions with donors that municipalities might not.

In addition, our board was advised by the Land Trust Alliance to carry directors' insurance in the event that an easement violation lawsuit gets reversed and someone decides to sue each of the board members of QBNA/PBLT. We are obtaining a quote from Noyes Insurance Company in Plymouth so that we are protected while we work to protect special places.

Currently, the PBLT committee is working with the White Mountain Conservation Burial organization on the possibility of establishing a conservation easement in Benton for green burials. Read about this in our lead article!

And lastly, perhaps you've noticed the newest addition to Quincy Bog: a portapotty in our parking area. We have had a steady increase in visitors, and our modest composting toilet in the Nature Center cannot handle increased use. The portapotty is cleaned and maintained weekly by the rental company and is intended for daytime use. Attendees to our summer evening programs, as well as our volunteer Bog Hosts, will have access to our indoor facility.

See you at the Bog!

Marguerite St. Laurent-Crowell has served on the Board of Directors since 2012.

## A Little Goes a Long Way

Did you know that donations to the Bog help fund the publication and distribution of this *Bog Notes* newsletter? They also support our trail guides and checklists, summertime talks and walks, the Junior Naturalist program, trail repairs, building maintenance, and many other Bog and Land Trust expenses. Since we are almost entirely volunteer run, the entire donation goes directly towards our mission of Conserving Land, Connecting People with Nature. A little goes a long way at the Bog!

You can support these efforts via our online PayPal link using this QR code, or by mailing a check payable to Rumney Ecological Systems to: Quincy Bog Natural Area P.O. Box 90, Rumney, NH 03266



## In Memory of George A. "Al" Ports: Colleague, Mentor, and Friend of Quincy Bog

With deep gratitude and affection we honor George A. "Al" Ports, whose many years of service helped shape our organization and the Quincy Bog Natural Area. Al served on the Quincy Bog Board of Directors from 1990 to 2008, including as Board President from 1994 to 1997.

One of Al's most significant contributions came in 1997, when he initiated conversations about acquiring the final piece of privately-held land along the perimeter of the Bog. From 1997 to 2001, Al led a capital campaign to secure that land, raising \$85,000 — no small accomplishment for a small nonprofit organization in the late 1990s. While Stanley Smishkiss served as honorary chair, it was Al who did much of the behind-the-scenes work, including volunteer grant writing and outreach to donors. That campaign not only preserved critical habitat but also strengthened the Bog's long-term financial footing.

In 1997, working alongside Bill Taffe, Al helped develop our original Bird Checklist — a lasting contribution that deepened the Bog's educational mission. His commitment to conservation extended further in 2003, when he was instrumental in convincing the State of New Hampshire to donate the former Baker State Forest to our organization.



Al Ports at one of his favorite places.

Al's steady hand also helped protect key landscape features in 2011, when he assisted in negotiating a Deed Easement with property owners Tom and Terry Smith. That agreement preserved the land above the Ledges adjacent to Quincy Bog and secured for us the right to build and maintain the Ledges Loop Trail and Bog Overlook that visitors now enjoy.

Beyond land protection and fundraising, Al gave generously of his time and talents in many other ways. He served as editor of *Bog Notes* in the early 2000s and worked on the Development and Nominating Committees, helping ensure the organization had the financial and human resources necessary to fulfill its mission.

Even after stepping back from active Board service, he remained closely connected as Director Emeritus from 2011 to 2026. As a Bog abutter, he kept a watchful eye on the land he cared so deeply about, always ready to lend insight and support.

Al's legacy is everywhere at Quincy Bog — in the preserved acres, the trails we walk, the birds we record, and the financial stability we rely on. His service reflected not only leadership, but a profound love for this place and a belief in the power of community stewardship. We are all beneficiaries of that dedication.

# Junior Naturalist Corner

Marguerite St. Laurent-Crowell

## The Five S's of Birding

Spring is a great time to learn about birds! When you see one, practice the Five S's! They can help you build your observation skills and figure out what species you are seeing!

### Shape

What overall shape does the bird have?  
Is it tall with long legs? Round with a short tail?

### Shade

What color(s) do you observe on different parts of the bird?  
Does it have a white belly? A blue back? A yellow face?

### Size

Is the bird larger or smaller than your hand?  
A book? A strawberry?

### Sound

Is the sound the bird is making a single short note?  
A long note? Many repeating notes?

### Space

Is the bird perching in a tree? Floating in the water?  
Standing? Hopping on the ground?

source: blmccsc

Helpful Tools:

- ✓ Binoculars
- ✓ Notepad and pencil or pen
- ✓ Bird field guide, free app like Merlin or Audubon Bird Guide, or website like [www.allaboutbirds.org/guide](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide)

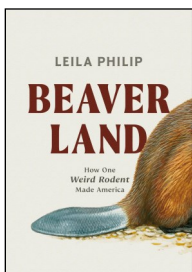
Marguerite St. Laurent-Crowell has a special fondness for our fine feathered friends.

## Books We're Reading at the Bog

### Beaverland:

### How One Weird Rodent Made America

A review submitted by Mark Runquist



Author Leila Philip's keynote speech at the 2026 NH Land Trust Coalition's "Saving Special Places" conference featured *Beaverland*, her wide-ranging book on the history and importance of beavers in the indigenous, economic, social, and environmental history of North America.

In the book, she tells stories of beaver researchers, such as Dorothy Richards, famous for sharing her home with domesticated beavers – including one aptly named "Eager."

Philip traces historical figures associated with the beaver, including John Jacob Astor, Lewis Henry Morgan, and Edwin Way Teale, through tales encountered in her travels from her Connecticut home to New Hampshire, Oregon, Michigan, New York, and Maryland.

To quench her thirst for knowledge about beaver behavior, Phillip makes the acquaintance of a beaver trapper, opening the way for hours of conversation while wading through brush and wetlands and, eventually, attending pelt auctions. The trappers are initially suspicious of this white female intellectual intruding into their domain, but she befriends several and they teach her a lot about beavers.

During a visit to the Hubbard Brook Experimental Forest near Woodstock, NH, she accompanies Scott Bailey (Forest Service Research Scientist and former Quincy Bog/Pemi-Baker Land Trust board member), described as "a jovial-looking man dressed

like a park ranger." They bushwack to the site of remote dams and share the history and purposes of the long-term ecosystem research at Hubbard Brook.

The book's conclusion highlights the beaver's role in providing ecosystem services by reducing flooding and other mechanisms. Their ponded dams capture water that helps plants and animals survive droughts. Out West, dam complexes provide sanctuary during and after massive wildfires, creating oases of life.

The book provides numerous fun facts, such as the discovery of the largest known non-human made structure in the world (a beaver dam 2,790 feet long in Alberta, Canada), that beaver meat was given the status of fish for no-meat Lenten Fridays, and that beaver castor is now worth more than its fur. The castor is used to flavor red licorice and a host of foods flavored like raspberry and strawberry.

A copy of the book is available in the Nature Center for browsing.

Mark Runquist would have a difficult time naming his favorite beaver dam. After decades of hunting waterfowl behind them, casting lines for Brook Trout near them, or crossing over them on remote hiking trails, he knows that as long as he can negotiate the tricky transit across one, he'll still be keeping up with the youngsters.



## Board of Directors

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Names are followed by the year of joining Board.

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\*member of original Board

**Editors:** Lisa Doner & Kerry Yurewicz

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*Quincy Bog Notes is a twice-yearly newsletter of information, announcements, and news about the Quincy Bog Natural Area and Pemi-Baker Land Trust.*

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## Quincy Bog Notes

*(Continued from page 1, Webster)*

The bottom line is that natural burial does not pollute air, soil, or water. Bodies nurture the soil when buried in direct contact with soil microbes, near insects whose main job is to break down organic tissue, and accessible to fungi that decompose the bones and other durables. Plant and tree roots derive essential elements created by the local effect of soil disturbance and nutrient enrichment of natural graves dug to the right depth.

### The Next Step: Conservation Burial

Natural burial grounds place idea of land conservation first. Ignoring land isn't saving it. Land is saved when we buy it, steward it, restore it, and protect it. When situated on land that is protected with a conservation easement, a natural burial ground saves land while promoting multiple conservation values. No other disposition method does that.

To better understand conservation burial, we need to flip our thinking. Instead of seeing cemeteries as commodities or inevitable sites of hazardous waste, we can view burial as a strategy for saving land and furthering our human connection to plant and animal communities. The goals of conservation burial are strongly aligned with conservation goals in general - to set aside intrinsically valuable land for nature and our own sakes, and to restore or preserve land subject to humans' misuse to one of balance and abundance.

Those seeking to contribute to land protection by purchasing burial rights may also want to leave a legacy for future generations. Burial on a portion of the protected land permanently ties individuals and families to the land through their shared story,

encouraging active conservation with funding support. Use of a portion of each conserved property for burial can help provide financial opportunities that contribute to conservation and restoration of wide swaths of permanently protected land.

Conservation burial brings the means to maximize authentic engagement with nature at a time of loss. Burial becomes a gift that protects land for all, well into the future. Something to think about when the party is over.

**Lee Webster** is an advocate for funeral reform who has served in leadership on the Green Burial Council, Conservation Burial Alliance, National Home Funeral Alliance, and National End-of-Life Doula Alliance. She founded and currently directs NH Funeral Resources & Education, is President of Natural Burial NH and White Mountain Conservation Burial, and is a past member of the Rumney Ecological Systems Board, Plymouth Conservation Commission, and NH Association of Conservation Commissions. She is author of several home funeral and green burial books, and an instructor in adult ed, colleges and universities, and online classes.

