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YORK NEIGHBORS: Sanctuary takes shape

So far, 135 acres of prime habitat for a rare turtle are set aside.

By ANNE GLEASON, Staff Writer

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Derek Davis/Staff Photographer

The founders of the Blandings Park Wildlife Sanctuary gather at the future entrance to the park near Route 9 in Biddeford. Peggy Ann Ayers, front left, is joined by Mary Ellen Charles, front right. In back are David Ayers, Maripat Brady, Paul Brady, Kim Rich and Joe Habraken.

BIDDEFORD — For 20 years, Peggy Ann Ayers lived off of Pool Road and didn't realize how much undeveloped land sat behind the largely residential Route 9 corridor in the area. Now she knows about it, and she and several other volunteers are working to ensure large portions of the land, home to endangered Blanding's turtles, are preserved.

About two years ago, Ayers and her husband, Dave, came up with the concept for the Blandings Park Wildlife Sanctuary. About 1,000 acres of undeveloped land exists in the sanctuary's focus area, which encompasses a large block of land spanning from West Street to Pool Street and Granite Street to Guinea Road. The sanctuary's goal is to preserve 500 acres.

"We didn't realize what was back here. I never realized there was so much vacant land," Ayers said. "It's our dream that if we could get at least 500 acres, that would be best for the turtles."



Photo by Susan Woodward

A Blanding's turtle

The sanctuary is still in its beginning phases, but the Ayers eventually intend to open preserved land to the public, develop a trail network and create educational programming in what will eventually be called Blandings Park. Their hope is to preserve habitat for the turtles and other small creatures, but also create a nature sanctuary for the public on a rare, undeveloped block of land along the coast in southern Maine.

BLANDING'S TURTLE

With its helmet-shaped carapace (upper shell) and hinged plastron (bottom shell), the Blanding's turtle might be mistaken for a box turtle by the casual observer.

The Blanding's turtle is 7 to 9 inches long and distinguished by a black or dark-olive carapace usually patterned with tan or yellow spots or streaks. The head is large with a notched upper jaw and a long, bright yellow neck, throat, and chin.

The plastron varies from yellow with dark blotches to almost completely black, and has a moveable hinge used to partially close the shell. Males have a darkly pigmented upper jaw and concave plastron, whereas females have a yellow upper jaw and a flat plastron.

RANGE AND HABITAT

Maine's population occurs only in southern York and Cumberland

The Ayers own a 45-acre parcel in the sanctuary's focus area. They initially planned to develop it into a large senior living development. But Dave Ayers was at a town planning board meeting one night when officials with the statewide Beginning with Habitat program made a presentation about significant habitat areas in the city. Included in the presentation were parts of the Ayers' land and parcels belonging to neighboring landowners.

Beginning with Habitat is a cooperative effort between state and federal agencies, conservation groups and regional governments in Maine.

That state and city didn't have the resources to follow up on the research of Beginning with Habitat, Peggy Ann Ayers said. So she and her husband decided to create an organization, now the sanctuary. So far, they've spoken with neighboring landowners and have preserved 135 acres. The sanctuary also now has about 13 to 16 other volunteers on the advisory board or various committees.

Jim and Susan Lamb, who owned a large parcel of land in the sanctuary focus area, last year donated 35 acres, a value of \$300,000. The Lambs developed four lots on the front portion of their land, and as a trade-off, were asked by the state to donate the back portion of their land to a land trust. They chose the Blandings Sanctuary.

"They were new and fresh," Jim Lamb said. "I liked their ideas. It seemed like more of an all-around thing, where people would be able to use the land we donated to them."

The sanctuary, Ayers said, is emphasizing limited conservation

counties and is linked with those in eastern New Hampshire and Massachusetts. Blanding's turtles are found most frequently in complexes of small, acidic wetlands and vernal pools in large blocks (over 500 acres) of forested habitat. They are occasionally found in large marshes, forested and shrub swamps, and slow-moving rivers and streams.

Although these turtles spend most of their time in the water, they readily travel from one wetland to another during spring and summer. Upland habitats are critical for nesting, basking, estivating (a period of late summer dormancy) and as travel corridors.

Source: Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife

development, where land development is encouraged on the outskirts of land, and other, less accessible portions are preserved for habitat.

The Ayers will be developing about 17 acres of their own parcel in the focus area, donating the remaining 28 acres to the sanctuary. They will be putting in a new road, Blandings Way, which will be used for their planned housing subdivision for seniors, but also for a public access point to the future Blandings Park.

The Blandings Park area is the site of former quarries, so a rough trail network already exists, Ayers said. Volunteers need only to further clear and mark the trails.

They hope to put their new road in by the end of this year. When that happens, public access will become available, Blandings Park will open and the educational programs can start, Ayers said. She hopes to work with local teachers to develop programs.

"We wanted to do this so people could use (the land), but we could also preserve it for the little creatures," Ayers said. "You get lost back there, but lost in a good way."

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