



Friends of the Washington County Grasslands IBA

- 2017 Annual Report -

www.ibafriends.org

Short-eared owls, photo courtesy Gordon Ellmers

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ANNUAL REPORT - 2017

An abundance of Short-eared owls - as many as 20-30 by DEC estimates - and numerous Northern harriers and Red-tailed and Rough-legged hawks wintered in the Washington County Grasslands IBA this year. We also saw increased activity by grassland breeding birds on FIBA conserved lands. FIBA's Land Campaign took a huge step forward thanks to a \$50,000 grant from the Open Space Institute (OSI), then in April we were awarded a two-year grant of \$75,000 from the New York State Conservation Partnership Program (NYSCPP)*. Winter Raptor Fest raised a record-setting \$30,000 in May, and contributions from members and new supporters increased by double digits for the year. Total Revenues grew by 35% over 2016.

Friends of the IBA's dedicated Board of Directors continued to build the organization's capacity to acquire, conserve and manage additional lands in the Washington County Grasslands Important Bird Area (IBA) with the addition of the land trusts' first two paid staff!

**Funding for this grant comes from New York's Environmental Protection Fund. The NYSCPP is administered by the Land Trust Alliance, in coordination with New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC).*

CONSERVATION

1) **OSI Awards \$50,000 Grant for 64 acre purchase!** Located near our AZS Viewing Area, this property provides important habitat for wintering and breeding grassland birds, including Short-eared owls, Snowy owls, Northern harriers, American kestrels, Horned larks, Eastern meadowlarks, Rough-legged hawks, Bobolinks and Savannah and Grasshopper sparrows. An abundance of mice and voles drew near-record numbers of Short-eared owls, hawks and harriers. However, an observed increase in inter-species conflicts and decrease in hunting success suggests prey populations were depleted by the end of the season. This could cause the birds to struggle next winter, as the number of acres of conserved land is still inadequate to support sustainable populations of breeding and wintering grassland birds.

2) **Assisting DEC Purchase of 180 acres** – New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC)'s proposed purchase of 180 acres of critical grassland habitat in the heart of the Washington County Grasslands Important Bird Area (IBA) from a willing landowner moved a step closer when the Fort Edward Town Board voted to work out an agreement with FIBA that would compensate the town for lost tax revenues (approximately \$4000) if they allow the purchase to go through. This agreement would be in effect until such time as the state begins paying taxes on the property (see Legislative action below). The property will become part of the state's existing Wildlife Management Area (WMA) managed by DEC.

3) **Legislative Action** - FIBA's "Grassland Bird Bill," introduced in 2016 by Senator Betty Little and Assemblywoman Carrie Woerner, was re-introduced in 2017. It would amend New York State's real property law to authorize the state to pay taxes on lands it owns in the Washington County Grasslands IBA towns of Argyle, Fort Edward and Kingsbury. The legislation is needed to increase support for grassland bird conservation in the Washington County Grasslands IBA. The Senate bill passed easily but Woerner had tougher going in the Assembly. However, thanks to a final push by FIBA supporters and partners, the Assembly Bill was voted out of the Real Property Taxation committee and sent to Ways and Means in the closing days of the session. The Bill came close to making it to the floor for a vote but the session ended before that could happen. Senator Little and Assemblywoman Woerner will introduce the legislation again next year and believe it has a good chance of passing. We'll be stepping up our efforts to make sure that happens!

4) **Alfred Z. Solomon Viewing Area** - FIBA's Alfred Z. Solomon Grassland Bird Viewing Area drew increased numbers of bird watchers, with visitation peaking during the winter. Our Viewing Area received hundreds of visits on any given weekend during the winter and continued to attract a growing number of bird watchers and local residents during spring and summer.

EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

1) **Winter Raptor Fest 2017**, May 13 & 14 - This year's Live Bird of Prey event set a new record, raising \$30,000 for FIBA's work. Our new "Birding Wagon" drew praise from kids and adults as families tested their bird identification skills during a horse drawn wagon ride. Visitors to our new "Wild Encounter" demonstration exhibit could see and learn about native owls, hawks and falcons in settings representing their natural habitats. The exhibit received such positive feedback we intend to create a new and expanded "Wild Encounter" in 2018!

2) **Other Education & Outreach** - FIBA's Education Committee developed new children's activities for Winter Raptor Fest that were later utilized for programs provided to summer camps and school groups. We also increased our presence at the Washington County Fair.

3) **Field Trips & Walks** - We encountered at least a few Short-eared owls and a variety of hawks on every FIBA field trip this winter. We saw a high of 15 of the owls at once during our March walk! The sight of a flock of owls swooping and hunting around us prompted one field trip participant to exclaim, "*This is better than Harry Potter!!*" Spring and Summer field trips continued to be popular as well and we expect to add new trips in 2018.

ORGANIZATIONAL GROWTH

1) **NEW STAFF, Executive Director** – Thanks to the NYSCPP staffing grant FIBA hired Director of Conservation and Development Laurie LaFond as our first Executive Director in June. LaFond founded the organization in 2010; she brings a BS in Nonprofit Administration and seven years of experience as Acting Director to her new role. First six months: LaFond led FIBA to double-digit increases in memberships and contributions in 2017. Goals for 2018:

Complete the 64-acre purchase, ensure our “Grassland Bird Bill” is passed and signed into law and continue to assist DEC with the 180-acre purchase so the transaction can close in 2018.

2) NEW STAFF, Office Manager - Roxanne Lelik was hired as part-time Office Manager in June, bringing over 20 years of experience to the organization. During her first six months she greatly improved member/ donor management and tracking. Donations were entered accurately and in a timely manner and communications kept current. Roxanne also helped increase overall office organization and efficiency.

3) NEW Committee Chair, Outreach & Volunteer Coordinator – Keith Swensen stepped into the breach to become our first Outreach Chair/ Volunteer Coordinator in June. He oversaw and coordinated volunteers for our booth at the Washington County Fair in August, ensuring we had volunteer coverage on every day of the fair for the first year ever! He coordinated volunteers for two other events we tabled at and attends meetings of local trail groups on FIBA’s behalf. Keith initiated our membership in and acts as FIBA’s liaison to the Historic Hudson Hoosic River Partnership.

FINANCIAL STATEMENT - FY 2017

Revenues

Grants & Contributions	\$79,628
Programs	\$29,363
2017 Total Revenues	\$108,991

Special Thanks to: New York State Conservation Partnership Program (NYSCPP)*, Open Space Institute, Stewarts Shops, GlensFalls.com and all of our members and supporters!

Expenses

Programs & Program Support	\$88,132
Fundraising	\$2,720
2017 Total Expenses	90,852

Balance \$18,140

**NYSCPP grants are funded through NY's Environmental Protection Fund and administered by the Land Trust Alliance in coordination with NYS DEC*

BOARD OF DIRECTORS:

- Mark Dilanni, President
- Cliff Oliver, Vice President
- Ron Renoni, Secretary
- Margaret Baldwin, Treasurer
- Scott Pulver
- Sandra Scroggins
- Ken Beckley

NON-VOTING MEMBERS:

- Laurie LaFond, Executive Director

VOLUNTEER RECOGNITION:

Special Thanks to Board and Committee members and all of our year-round volunteers:
Mark Janey, Dave Larrow, Karen Chapman, David deVries, Sean Junda, Keith Swensen, Gordon Ellmers, Sandi Sullivan, Bob Parker, Elizabeth Nichols, Debbie Kidalowski, Sandy Arnold, Paula Franchomme, Rich Speidel, Dan Albano, Bo Harris, Pete Benoit, Paula Hassan and Stewart Brown.

Thanks also to all of our volunteers who assisted at Winter Raptor Fest or other events and programs throughout the year!