

Spring 2020

# OPEN SPACE CHRONICLES

A newsletter by Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space

Photo by Kathryn Dunham

## FoHVOS: MAINTAINING CONNECTION AMID THE DISTANCE PROACTIVELY SUPPORTING ENVIRONMENTAL & PUBLIC HEALTH DURING PANDEMIC

As our name implies, Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space (FoHVOS) focuses on enhancing the quality of life in and around Hopewell Valley through land conservation. Specializing in a single region aids us in providing the best outcomes for our local community.

Take, for example, the recent situation with public parks. While the Governor reversed his April 7th order to close state and county preserves by reopening on May 2nd, FoHVOS opted to keep our preserves open for the duration.

For FoHVOS, the decision was grounded in our fundamental values. Our Board holds a fervent belief that it is our responsibility to steward public lands to best support the health and welfare of all -- including flora, fauna, and wildlife, and yes, community visitors.

That mindset differentiates our organization and is the basis for all of our actions.

### What this Means to You

We are here for you. Our preserve management, programs, and activities are focused on caring for land to proactively support environmental and public health.

Our first choice will always be to make our preserves accessible to the public. There are plenty of research studies that prove that getting outside and connecting with nature will help you stay happier and healthier.

### Does Coronavirus impact the strategy?

Yes. Connecting with community and nature improves health. Your life depends on it. While we all know that maintaining distance will help reduce the spread of the virus, it is equally important to take steps to reduce its impact if contracted.

A major cause of death in COVID-19 patients is acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS) which impacts the vast majority of COVID-19 patients admitted to intensive care. Medical research findings at the University of Virginia School of Medicine "strongly support" the possibility that exercise can prevent or at least reduce the severity of ARDS.

Finally, isolation and routine changes can contribute to mental health challenges including stress, sadness, and depression. Exercise and connecting with nature reduce anxiety, depression, and negative mood and improve self-esteem and cognitive function.

*Learn more on Page 2*

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#HVHUGATREE



Hopewell Valley Running Man Sreeni Nair hugs a tree at Elks Preserve. pg.5

SAVE THE DATE!

SEPT 19<sup>TH</sup> 2020

# FoHVOS ANNUAL GALA

Watch for details this summer!



# FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



We titled the newsletter cover, "Maintaining Connection Amid the Distance," since it is not only the secret to the success that FoHVOS has achieved, but also my personal strategy for minimizing the anxiety associated with this pandemic.

Since FoHVOS prioritized our partners and connections prior to Coronavirus, relying on those relationships was not a tremendous leap and it allowed us to responsibly pivot to meet our obligations and take a proactive leadership role. Let's review our progress.

By February 2020, FoHVOS had tremendous momentum. We came off a record year for revenues and engagement in 2019 and started January with a generous grant. We kicked off the year by successfully delivering partnered workshops, a subset of which are shown on page 4. The Art Sparks workshops all sold out within 24 hours and the Sky Safari was literally standing room only. Also, after a year of coordination and planning, February marked the start of an important grant-supported internship program known as "Building Conservation through Diversity and Teamwork." The program met weekly until mid-March and is now on-hold.

So now, the rest of the story begins. Take a moment to check out the timeline graphic in the sidebar.

We planned February and March Pollinator workshops to build habitat for rapidly declining bee populations. In February, we held a successful community workshops teaching families to make bee abodes. We confirmed late March dates to work with HVRSD, The Pennington School and Mercer County Tech School.

We heard rumblings about "social distancing" and figured it might make public workshops impossible, but since Mother Nature doesn't cancel her plans, we needed to consider other means for creating pollinator habitat. On March 13th, schools switched to remote learning. On March 14th, FOHVOS announced we converted our workshops to build-at-home Pollinator Packets and offered home delivery.

A week later, we offered pre-order options for native plants and wildflowers. We had also been advertising our free Guide to Walking Trails in Hopewell Valley, as well as our interactive GPS maps

At the same time, FoHVOS Board Trustee Frank Newport sent a letter

to local media outlets that inspired the Hopewell Valley News front page cover story, "Walking Seen as Positive In an Era of Coronavirus."

Both our pollinator packets and wildflower kits sold well, our trails were well-used, and the media coverage asserted a healthy message. FoHVOS was taking a leadership role by providing the community with healthy ways to maintain connections amid the distancing.

A week later we announced our daily #BotanicalBlurbs a 30-day countdown to Earth Day that presented viewers with photos and videos of features to look for while out on our trails.

On April 7th, the Governor announced trail closings and once again our partners and connections came into play. Intentional in our deliberations, FoHVOS Board Trustees and local elected leaders unanimously agreed that the rural nature of our locality could better support the distancing requirements than the more densely populated areas in North Jersey that the governor needed to consider in his statewide deliberation.

Our decision put extra pressure on our stewardship staff as we put extra measures in place to ensure distancing. They installed one-way signs on loop trails and closed the trails where we couldn't ensure safety.

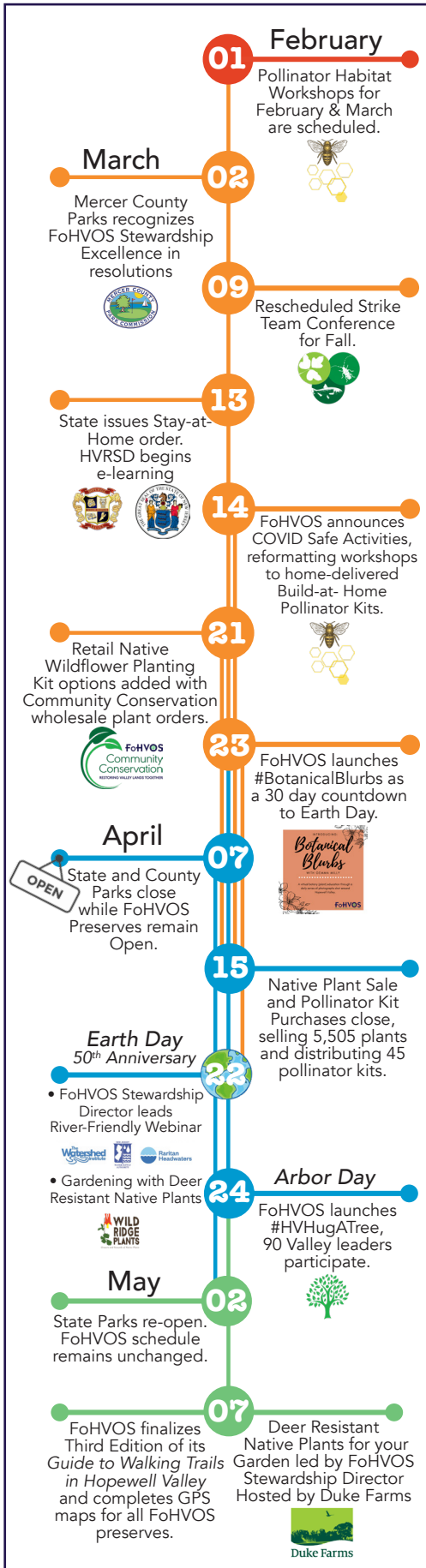
On Earth Day we led and hosted partnered webinars and on Arbor Day we coordinated 90 Hopewell Valley leaders in a Hopewell-Valley-Hug-A-Tree campaign. #HVHugATree exceeded our expectations and really brightened everyone's day. While you can see a sampling on page 5, I encourage you to go online and watch the video. Not surprisingly, the secret to the campaign's success was that it connected everyone to both nature and each other. Another way of Maintaining Connection Amid the Distance.

We will stay in touch, provide programs, and keep our trails open to proactively support our environment and community. 🌱

Be Safe & Stay healthy,

*Lisa Wolff*

Lisa Wolff  
Executive Director



## FoHVOS FOREST MANAGEMENT WORK: HOPEWELL VALLEY'S BEST KEPT SECRET

On March 2, **Mercer County Park Commission** entered into a formalized land stewardship relationship with the Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space, by passing two resolutions.

*Resolution 2020-27* – The Stewardship Assistance Agreement states FoHVOS will “assist the Park Commission in meeting its goal to maintain and improve the natural areas under its care through conservation stewardship and restoration practices” and recognizes FoHVOS “expertise in the management, research, and restoration of natural areas in order to improve the ecological value off said natural areas.”

*Resolution 2020-28* includes a detailed description on annual projects occurring on Baldpate Mountain and other Park Commission operated and maintained properties.

FoHVOS Stewardship Director Michael Van Clef, who holds a

Ph.D. in ecology, shared, “It’s really nice to be recognized for our expertise, I am proud of our fantastic stewardship team. FoHVOS has had a close partnership with Parks for years and we enjoy working with their talented staff.”

Van Clef directs the FoHVOS statewide Invasive Species Strike Team, has written forest health plans for major preserves across the state, and manages FoHVOS staff specialists that include a botanist specializing in rare plant research and ecologists monitoring birds and other threatened and rare wildlife.

FoHVOS Board Trustee Dr. Jeffrey Osborn, Dean of the School of Science at TCNJ, adds “The ecological work with Mercer County Parks complements the research FoHVOS has supported on their own preserves. Further extending their impact, TCNJ has been conducting research on FoHVOS properties for over a decade.”

FoHVOS Board President, Dr. Dan Rubenstein is the Director of Program in Environmental Studies Behavioral Ecology and Conservation at Princeton University and has been our trustee for almost 30 years. He witnessed as FoHVOS evolved from a small grassroots group preserving land to a recognized statewide leader in land stewardship and scientific research. FoHVOS has a deep bench of experts whose impacts far exceed the size of our organization.

Mercer County Parks joins the expanding list of organizations including NJCF, The Watershed, and local municipalities commissioning our services. “Since much of our work includes forest management and protecting rare species, it is often not well publicized,” shared Dr. Rubenstein. “The level of scientific experience, institutional knowledge, and research occurring within our local, grassroots nonprofit is probably The Valley’s Best Kept Secret.” 🌳



## FoHVOS COMMISSIONS DEER STUDY IN HOPEWELL VALLEY

BY MICHAEL VAN CLEF, PH.D.

Jay Kelly, professor from Raritan Valley Community College, has been studying deer across New Jersey, adding to the scientific literature and assisting many local governments in understanding the scope of deer overabundance.

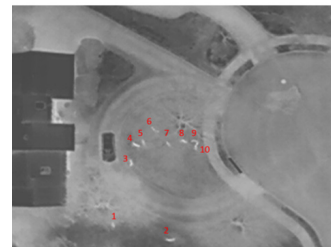
In 2019, Jay published a comprehensive study comparing the past and present condition of particular forests throughout New Jersey. Studies prior to the early 1970’s showed dramatically healthier forests than those that Jay resampled recently. Native shrubs, small trees and wildflowers have declined by nearly 80%. In the past, native plants accounted for > 95% of all plant cover and now the balance has shifted to invasive species making up > 50% of plant cover. With the increase in deer over the

last 50 years, native plants have declined and invasive plants have increased.

The first step in addressing deer overabundance is to know exactly how many deer are present. This past March, Jay and his team performed infrared drone surveys at three locations in the Valley – **Mount Rose Preserve** has 68 deer per square mile, **Pennington Borough** has 106 per square mile, and **Woolsey Park** has 102 per square mile. These results put a finer point on past nighttime spotlight counts done across the entire Valley by FoHVOS and the NJ Division of Fish & Wildlife in which the Valley-wide estimate from 2019 was 102 per square mile. These data allow individual landowners/municipalities to make land stewardship decisions

based upon their particular situation.

We know from the scientific literature that 10 deer per square mile leads to healthy forests, reduced Lyme disease and many fewer deer-vehicle collisions. Jay’s study showed levels 7-11X that amount, solutions will not be easy but we need to work collectively to solve the deer overabundance problem. 🌳



Infrared drone survey spotted ten deer in the front yard of a Pennington Borough resident.

# FoHVOS PARTNERED ACTIVITIES

## COMMUNITY CONSERVATION TAKES ACTION

Global bee population has declined due to biodiversity losses and habitat destruction



At the beginning of the year, FoHVOS initiated a series of partnered workshops for local schools and the community to create bee abodes, to use at home or contribute to larger bee hotels at FoHVOS preserves. In response to isolation measures, FoHVOS converted workshops to build-at-home "Pollinator Packets" that included home delivery.



Personal Bee abodes for home built at our February Family Workshop.



Personal Bee abodes for home built following directions in the Pollinator Packet.

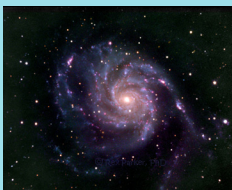


FoHVOS Bee abodes for placement in a bee hotel built from Pollinator Packet materials including repurposed pallet wood and invasive phragmites.

## A SKY SAFARI at Baldpate Mountain



Rex Parker, astrophotographer and Director of the Amateur Astronomers Association of Princeton, shared a presentation of galaxies, planets, ghostly nebulae, spectacular globular clusters and jewel-box, open star clusters. Participants were also treated to using state-of-the-art telescopes on the patio of Baldpate and witnessed the night sky like never before.



Spiral-Galaxy Photo by Rex Parker



Attendees use state of the art telescopes on our patio!



## FAMILY WORKSHOPS

FoHVOS partnered with Hopewell Valley's premiere Art Studio to offer the second in a series of their art and nature family workshops with proceeds going to the newly planned Hopewell Elementary School outdoor reflection area. The workshop offered an opportunity to create a mixed media bird portrait on a wood panel inspired by artist Pete Cromer.



## BUILDING CONSERVATION THROUGH DIVERSITY & TEAMWORK



This amazing project engaged high school students from Hopewell Valley Central High School and the Boys & Girls Clubs of Mercer County to team up on paid internships performing land conservation work throughout Mercer County. It was cut short due to stay-at-home orders.

Students from a variety of backgrounds collaborated worked in teams and received leadership and ecological training from a team of experts to address growing environmental needs for clean water, air, and protected habitat. Students gained skills transferable for future educational and employment opportunities.



## FoHVOS PARTNERED WEBINARS

**APRIL 22** | River-Friendly Webinar  
Led by FoHVOS Stewardship Director  
Hosted by Raritan Headwaters



Rachel Mackow of Wild Ridge Plants



FoHVOS Stewardship Director,  
Mike Van Clef

**APRIL 22** | Gardening with Deer Resistant Native Plants  
Led by Rachel Mackow of Wild Ridge Plants  
Hosted by FoHVOS



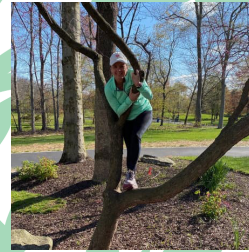
**MAY 07** | Deer Resistant Native Plants for your Garden  
Led by FoHVOS Stewardship Director  
Hosted by Duke Farms



We partnered with many organizations to share interesting content. **Over 500 people joined us!** In times of isolation, people watch more screens. We hope our workshops inspired participants to get outside and enjoy nature. 🌿

## ARBOR DAY 2020 #HVHUGATREE

Over 90 Hopewell Valley leaders shared photos of themselves hugging a nearby tree. Trees provide oxygen for the planet, habitat for animals, and fruit for sustenance. Yet, the energy of trees goes far beyond physical attributes – trees affect our mental, emotional, and spiritual outlook. Staying healthy in times of pandemic means not only maintaining distance from other humans but also building personal resistance by getting fresh air, exercise, and time to enjoy our trees outdoors.



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## OUR MISSION:

*Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space is an accredited non-profit land trust that is dedicated to preserving the Valley's character by partnering with the community to **preserve** land, **protect** natural resources, and **inspire** a new generation of conservation.*



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