



# GAINING GROUND

Fall 2022



# PRESIDENT'S LETTER



As I sit down to write this letter, rain has finally come to Dutchess County after a long, hot and brutally dry summer. When that first rain finally did come, I stood outside appreciating the simple smells and sounds of this long-awaited act of nature. The following morning, I noticed the ground starting to soften, as the soil began to absorb the desperately needed moisture. I am sure I was not alone in spending some time thinking of how fragile our ecosystems are during this most recent drought. As you read this newsletter, you may notice several programs and stories focusing on soil, which feels exceptionally timely. There is our Soil Health Workshop with the Columbia Land Conservancy and our Second Annual Earth Matters webinar series focusing on how soils build healthy gardens and farms. Julie Hart writes about the wide variety of fungi and how they break down key nutrients of decaying matter and returning them to the soil for her “Explorer’s Notebook.” One of our two feature stories, the Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) of Obercreek Farm in Wappinger, also brings the importance of soil top-of-mind. This sixth-generation farm run by Alex Reese and his siblings has 42 acres of prime soils and 81 acres of soils of statewide

importance. There is a great deal more to this story, as you’ll read in later pages.

The other theme I noticed emerging in this issue is a focus on habitat protection, and perhaps nowhere more clearly than with our cover story on our most recent forever protected property, the Jesse and Gayle Bontecou Wildlife Conservation Preserve. This tremendous gift from Gayle and Jesse will create a 1,250 acre preserve and add to a remarkable swath of 12,000 acres of contiguous conserved properties. Among the countless benefits of this donation, and of particular importance to Gayle and Jesse,



is the habitat preservation it provides for wildlife in perpetuity. Also in this newsletter, Lucas Gordon reports on the state of habitat loss for the New England cottontail in his regular column “Nature of Things.” It is exactly this kind of action taken by Gayle and Jesse that will create a safe place for this vulnerable species of native rabbit to flourish, as well as countless other wood and wetland creatures who call this area home. Words truly do escape me when describing what this gift means to me, the DLC, and the larger Millbrook community and beyond, but it is an honor for us to steward this preserve into the future.

As a final note, I’d like to draw your attention to our new scholarship program with the



Dutchess County 4-H club developed this year. Twenty-two 4-H’ers, our future farmers, amazed us with their thoughtful and heartfelt essays on the importance of farming and land conservation. Their meditations gave me such hope for the future and steeled my determination. I recalled these words of President Theodore Roosevelt: “Here is your country. Cherish these natural wonders, cherish the natural resources, cherish the history and romance as a sacred heritage, for your children and your children’s children.” Let us continue our work together, to protect what we love most.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads “Becky”.

Becky Thornton



This page, clockwise from top left: DLC President Becky Thornton; at the Spring Road Rally Event; closing left on the Jesse and Gayle Bontecou Wildlife Conservation Preserve; awarding scholarships to the Dutchess County 4H Club. On the Cover: an iconic view from the Bontecou property,

# CONSERVATIONIST'S CALENDAR

*Exciting events, happenings and opportunities are planned for this fall.*

*Please visit [dutchessland.org](http://dutchessland.org) for more information or call 845.677.3002.*

## Soil Checkup

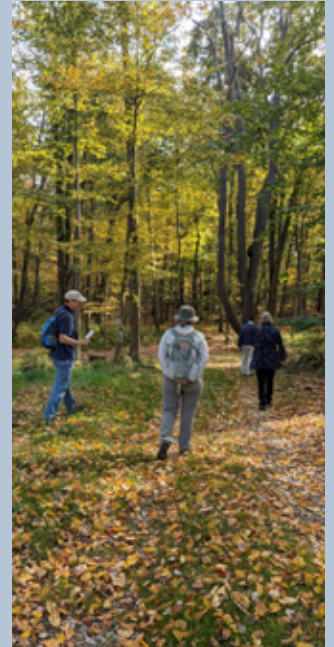
“Down to Earth: Soil Health Workshop,” part of our Farmer/Landowner Match Program collaboration with the Columbia Land Conservancy, will take place on Saturday, October 8 from 9:00 to 11:00 AM at the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies in Millbrook. Learn how to manage soil health and work with the land, not against it. 2803 Sharon Turnpike in Millbrook.

## Let's Talk Dirt

Our Earth Matters webinar series returns this fall with a second season focusing on soils and their importance in building healthy gardens and farms, providing us clean water, cycling nutrients and so much more. Beginning on November 1, each webinar will feature exciting speakers on the first Tuesday of each month through April. Visit [dutchessland.org](http://dutchessland.org) for more information.

## Journey Through Time

Join DLC Ecologist Julie Hart and Connecticut Audubon on Saturday, November 12 from 10:00 AM to noon to discover the history of Deer Pond Farm located in Pawling, NY and Sherman, CT. From the glaciers scraping and compressing the earth to its present day use as an Audubon Sanctuary, come explore this spectacular landscape. 57 Wakeman Hill Road in Sherman, CT. 🌿



## OUT & ABOUT: GREAT GOINGS ON

*A look back at some of our summer programming.*

### Finding Feathered Friends

Dave Decker, Audubon NY's Land Steward, in conjunction with the DLC, led the tranquil walk at the Buttercup Audubon Sanctuary on the evening of June 30th. Enthusiastic birders walked along the creek and through the meadows, where birds were found in abundance, busily searching for food before nesting down for the night.



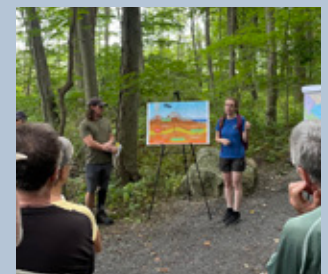
### Building Bridges

This summer the DLC partnered with The Nature Conservancy to improve the trails at the Thompson Pond Preserve in Pine Plains. A new bridge was constructed, existing trails were widened and new trails were blazed. While trail work is coming to an end for this season, keep an eye on our website and social media for more volunteer opportunities in the spring.



### Brewing Connections

Plan Bee Farm Brewery owner Emily Watson and DLC Ecologist Julie Hart led a talk on sustainable agriculture at this 25-acre farm in Poughkeepsie. Emily gave a tour of the brewery and explained the processes used to brew some of the finest beer in the Hudson Valley, which has been organically grown on land cultivated since the early 1800s, and has a national market.



### Rockin' the Ice Age

Geologist Becky Nesel led guests on a weeknight geology walk through Thompson Pond Preserve at the base of Stissing Mountain on August 18. She started by telling the story of the rocks that are more than a billion years old and then explained how at Thompson Pond, a glacial kettle formed when a piece of the last ice sheet was left behind, creating a depression in the land that filled with water. 🌿

# NATURE OF THINGS

*In this installment of our favored fauna column, Lucas Gordon gets into the brambles with the New England cottontail to talk habitat.*

**Q: Please introduce yourself and tell us what makes your species so special?**

**A:** Hi, there! I'm a New England cottontail named Mayflower. Known to some as *Sylvilagus transitionalis*, I'm a member of one of the few rabbit species native to New England and eastern New York. Just as native to Dutchess County as to Danbury, the misleading nature of the New England cottontail's name is a lesson in why most scientists prefer Latin.

**Q: I have trouble telling rabbits apart, how do I know if I've found your species?**

**A:** We share the region's dense forests and bucolic pastures with the eastern cottontail, *Sylvilagus floridanus*, introduced from the southern and mid-western U.S. by hunters in the nineteenth century. Nearly the same size and dressed in an interchangeably white-tailed, gray-brown coat, we differentiate ourselves only with our eyes, half the size of theirs, and sometimes with a black dot smackdab on our foreheads. Seeing predators from farther away, their eyes give them a notable advantage in our increasingly competitive and fragmented landscapes. They now outnumber us in our native range.

**Q: What makes your species so vulnerable?**

**A:** Since we are an important food source to a wide range of predators, we live fast and die young with an average lifespan of 15 months. Most active at dawn and dusk, we spend our brief lives browsing on vegetation in small 0.5 to 8 acre ranges until one fateful sunset one of us steps too far from protective cover and is scooped up by a coyote, fox or one of our other countless enemies. Though the life of a single rabbit may seem trivial, each New England cottontail is crucial to the region's history, identity and biodiversity.



**Q: What is the status of the New England Cottontail today?**

**A:** Following decades of steady decline, today only around 13,000 New England cottontails remain in the wild. Much of this downtrend can be attributed to New England's unprecedented habitat loss. Since colonization began, our historic range has decreased by 85%. Our species' preferred ecosystem, young forests called early successional habitats, once offered us protection from predators with their acres of thick brambles and brush. The restoration and protection of our habitat will be an essential step in keeping this true Yankee rabbit in its rightful home. 🌿

# EXPLORER'S NOTEBOOK

*DLC Education Director Julie Hart explores the wondrous and varied world of fungi in her notebook this issue.*

Until the 20th century, fungi were classified as plants. That seems logical because fungi and plants appear to have quite a bit in common, at least at first glance. Both are usually rooted in the ground, and neither one moves around – at least not noticeably! But as we learned more about the structure and function of fungi, it became clear that they are actually more closely related to animals than to plants.

How can this be? Well, the cells wall of fungi are composed of chitin, which is also found in the exoskeletons of insects and crustaceans like crabs and shrimp, but is never found in plants. And as a general rule, plants use chlorophyll to make their own food through photosynthesis. In contrast, animals and fungi get their food from external sources, either by ingesting and absorbing nutrients from their food (animals), or accessing and absorbing nutrition through a mass of filaments (fungi).

When you hear the word “fungus”, you most likely will picture a mushroom of some sort, but this is only a part of the whole organism. A mushroom is the fruiting body of the fungus; in other words, it is the part that makes the spores that are responsible for reproduction. The fungus itself consists of a mass of threadlike filaments called a mycelium that extends throughout the substrate the fungus grows in, whether it is the soil, a decaying tree trunk, or leaf litter on the forest floor.

Often known as nature’s best recyclers, fungi serve the critical function of breaking down decaying organic matter. Networks of mycelia permeate dead plants and animals and gradually decompose them; during this process the fungi return nutrients and organic matter to the soil. Humus is the dark, organic material (not to be confused with hummus, a delicious spread made with chickpeas!) that is formed through this process of decay and is an important component of healthy soil.

Fungi are an incredibly diverse and multi-talented group, ranging from microscopic single-celled yeasts to fungi that span acres, weigh tons, and are centuries old. An Armillaria fungus that extends over 90 acres in Michigan is one of the best-known examples of a “humongous fungus”; it weighs over 100 tons and is estimated to be about 1,500 years old!

They may seem creepy and even a little bit kooky, but without fungi we wouldn’t have bread or beer, and our soils would lack the nutrients and organic matter needed to grow forests and crops. So, as you come across them in your wanderings, take a moment to stop and appreciate this wondrous form of life, that serves such critical functions and is also beautiful and fascinating to behold! 🍄



# Preserving the Future

By Georgina Schaeffer

*At the end of this summer, the Dutchess Land Conservancy received one of the single most important gifts in its 37-year history from Gayle and the late Jesse Bontecou.*

“It was so important to Jesse and me that this land be permanently preserved as a conservation refuge where animals can peacefully live in their natural habitat,” Gayle Bontecou begins. At the end of August, landowners Gayle and the late Jesse Bontecou donated more than 1,250 acres of critical wetland and forest habitat, open fields, wooded hillsides, streams and Bontecou Lake to the Dutchess Land Conservancy (DLC). This incredible donation also increases an impressive band of more than 12,000 acres of contiguous protected land, creating a greater, safer corridor for countless species of wildlife.

All a part of their historic Rally Farm, this land and its irreplaceable natural resources will be forever safeguarded and held in ownership by the DLC, with perpetual protection through a conservation easement

granted to Scenic Hudson. This two-pronged donation will ultimately create the Jesse and Gayle Bontecou Wildlife Conservation Preserve. “This gift makes my eyes water with tears of immeasurable joy and gratitude,” DLC President Becky Thornton says. “Jesse and Gayle so loved this land and its countless special and unique qualities. I cannot thank Gayle enough for her commitment to seeing through their desire to donate and protect this land as a forever preserve.”

Established by former state senator Frederic Bontecou in 1926, Rally Farms was one of the best-known in Dutchess County, producing national champion Black Angus cattle, a legacy that was continued by Frederic’s son, Jesse. This legacy, too, will continue because in addition to the wetland, forest and wildlife habitat protections, the Jesse and Gayle Bontecou Wildlife Conservation Preserve includes hundreds of acres of fertile farm soils and fields. These lands will continue to be responsibly farmed by local farmers, utilizing the best practices established over decades by Jesse Bontecou.

“This land is truly iconic and so well-known to people



*This page:* Jesse and Gayle Bontecou (above); Bontecou Lake (right);  
*Opposite, clockwise from top:* soy fields that will remain in agriculture;  
a red barn; a spectacular view from the Bontecou property.



throughout this area,” Thornton continues. “With frontage on four local roads, the property is visible for miles, and the 130-acre Bontecou Lake is a favorite view to many.” Bontecou Lake, one of Dutchess County’s largest lakes, is a vital habitat for wetland wildlife. The Town of Stanford designated the northern portion of the lake and the remaining portion of Tamarack Swamp as a Critical Environmental Area in 1987 because of the migratory waterfowl and nesting birds including bald eagles, great blue herons, osprey, Canada geese, mallards, wood ducks, sparrows, eastern bluebirds, and countless other bird species. Jesse and Gayle were avid birders, traveling the world on ecotours, experiencing firsthand many of these special winged species. At home, the couple loved this land and its endless special qualities. In an article in *Country Folks* in 2013, Jesse stated, “You should walk around and enjoy this beauty in life because ultimately that is so very important.”

In addition, the land’s abundant critical water resources include the headwaters of the East Branch of the Wappinger Creek and tributaries to the Wassaic Creek. The wetlands straddle the drainage divide between the Wappinger Creek watershed to the west and

the Wassaic Creek/Tenmile River watersheds to the east.

Jesse and Gayle Bontecou’s dedication to the land extended far beyond their own farm to the greater Millbrook area. Jesse was a founding member of the DLC’s Board and Gayle serves on the DLC’s Advisory Council and was a former Board member herself. “We can think of no greater stewards of this land than the Dutchess Land Conservancy and Scenic Hudson together,” she concludes. Because no single land preservation organization can both own and hold a conservation easement on protected property, it was paramount to the success of this project that Scenic Hudson come on board. “It is rare for a landowner to donate such a large and significant property as the Jesse and Gayle Bontecou Wildlife Conservation Preserve,” Seth McKee, executive director of The Scenic Hudson Land Trust, says. “We are in awe of the vision and generosity of Gayle and Jesse, and we thank Gayle for this wonderful donation. Together with our partner Dutchess Land Conservancy, we will ensure that the Preserve’s natural character endures.” Becky Thornton agrees, adding, “This is a gift that is unmatched by any we have seen before. It will live on in perpetuity. I feel very blessed that the DLC is the recipient of this amazing and wonderful donation, and that Gayle double protected it with a conservation easement to Scenic Hudson.” 🍀



# A Family Legacy

By Georgina Schaeffer

*The Reese family has stewarded land conservation efforts throughout Dutchess County for decades. Now Alexander Reese turns his focus to the family's own Obercreek Farm.*

Nestled along the eastern banks of the Wappinger Creek, just upstream of its confluence with the Hudson River, is the historic Obercreek Farm. Located in the Town of Wappinger, the farm's 200 some acres have been owned and operated by the Reese family for six generations and is currently being stewarded by Alex Reese and his siblings. "This is a particularly exciting project for us because the farm is in a more densely populated area," DLC President Becky Thornton explains. "The greater Millbrook area has benefitted greatly from patchworking together contiguous parcels of land, but it is equally valuable when we have an opportunity to conserve land in a neighborhood which may not have as many options for open space."

While Wappingers may be a less common location for an easement, the Reese family are not newcomers to land conservation. Alex's mother, Franny Reese, was a trailblazer in the environmental movement, fighting Con Edison and saving Storm King Mountain from a proposed massive hydro-electrical power plant in 1962. "My mom was a pioneer and a visionary. She couldn't abide by the idea of a power plant in one of [the Hudson Valley's] most beautiful and iconic spots ... It would have taken down half the mountain," Alex Reese told the *Times Union* in an article earlier this year. The fight took some 17 years to win, and in the end, Reese and her five citizen allies had not only founded Scenic Hudson, but also won Americans the right to speak out and initiate lawsuits to protect their environment in a landmark decision, which in turn created the backbone of environmental law. Today, Alex Reese continues his family's legacy with Scenic Hudson, serving as the chairman of the Scenic Hudson Land Trust.

Alex has also picked up his family mantle closer to home at Obercreek. He and his wife, architect Alison Spear, restored the original farmhouse, which he purchased from his siblings in 2006. Originally a dairy farm operated by the Reese family until the 1960s, the land was leased to a local farmer for cattle and corn. In 2012, Alex, his wife and their young partners began growing NOFA-NY (Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York) and USDA-certified organic fruits and vegetables. The team set up a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) operation to distribute the produce to CSA members. A farm store on the property also sells fruits







and vegetables grown on the farm, as well as a variety of products including chutneys, pestos and pies. “We grow diversified seasonal vegetables, herbs and hops while maximizing our growing space through efficient and thoughtful techniques, which require less land to achieve economic and agricultural sustainability. All of our certified organic produce is grown on nine acres and utilize cover crops and compost to regenerate fields,” Alex says. “Through the utilization of 20,000 indoor production space, we are able to achieve continuous year-round production for the benefit of our community,” he continues, describing the farm’s five greenhouses and prop shed. Alex’s latest venture is developing a brewery in one of the property’s barns, which he began in 2017. Obercreek Brewery beers are currently made with hops grown on the property as well as those purchased from other farms, but Alex and his business partner are trialing more hops with hopes to grow the business. “Although our beer can occasionally be found on tap at a few accounts within the area, the majority of our beer is sold on-site at our tasting room,” he notes. Alex is also hopeful Obercreek’s five-acre apple orchard, also planted in 2017, will be ready to bear fruit that can be included in cider production next year.



Last year, Alex Reese completed the protection of his own personal 42 acres at Obercreek Farm with the DLC and is also currently working with the DLC on a conservation project to protect the farm’s remaining 144 acres. Approximately 85 percent of the property contains agricultural soils with 42 acres of prime soils and 81 acres of soils of statewide importance. All of the lands at Obercreek are certified organic and nearly half of the property is in active agriculture, supplying fruits and vegetables to the farm stand and CSA, hops for the brewery or hay farmed by a local farmer who leases land in the area. “I think my parents would have really appreciated it, but more importantly it’s one of the last farms left in this part of the world and the community values it and will appreciate it being a farm in perpetuity.” 🌿



*This page, clockwise from top: the Brewery barn; the entrance to Obercreek; beers available at Obercreek Brewery; a view of some of the land; a sculpture near the outdoor tasting area; a bench outside the tap-room. **Opposite,** fresh produce list at the farm stand; the farm stand’s seasonal offerings.*

# PROGRAM NOTES



Each year at the Dutchess County Fair, the Dutchess County 4-H holds a Barn Bash to celebrate the end of an exciting and strenuous week for 4-H'ers and acknowledge the group's accomplishments. At this year's big event, families whooped and hollered as 22 young 4-H'ers stepped forward to receive a scholarship from the Dutchess Land Conservancy, an amazing triumph to cap off a year of teamwork.

This spring, the two organizations began working on a "Conserve Our County" program for 4-H middle and high school kids, where participants learned about the Dutchess County landscape, soil health, crop rotation and more. There were field trips to Brookby Farm and Wethersfield, and in June, the DLC was one of many sponsors of the Dutchess County 4-H's fundraising gala, "A-Fair to Remember."

At this year's gala, held at the Millbrook Winery and Vineyard (a DLC forever protected property), 4-H'ers proudly displayed and spoke to guests about their projects on a range of chosen topics including animal care, archery and soap making. "We were so impressed by the 4-H'ers presentations and knowledge of their individual subjects, we began to think about how to support their work as a way to further enhance our dedication to this area's farming future," DLC President Becky Thornton explains. "Working with the 4-H, we developed an all-new scholarship program designed to help individual 4-H youth with the costs associated with attending the Dutchess County Fair." The DLC's Board of Directors enthusiastically endorsed the scholarship program and applications went out in July.

As part of the application process, 4-H'ers were asked to write an essay about the importance of land conservation and its relationship to good farm management or about how farming is critical to the community and why it is important to people. Twenty-two 4-H'ers applied for scholarships and their essays amazed and delighted us with their thoughtful and heartfelt meditations on the importance of farming and land conservation, both to themselves and the public at large. - Doug Ohlandt

## In their own words:

*"I hope that our generation will be able to continue the land conservation process in both our local areas and all over our country. If people continue to manage our land properly not only can we benefit from this now but our future children and grandchildren can benefit as well."*

- Isabella Tropea, Age 13

*"Through the seasons I can nurture my animals and realize how important it is to care for the land that provides for us."*

- Tessa Mashburn, Age 10

*"Farming is something my family has done for generations. My dad did it and his dad did too. I believe that being in a position to help others and helping them is such an important thing to do and providing for others is what farming is all about."*

- Corra DiBlasi, Age 12

Congratulations to the recipients of the first Dutchess Land Conservancy 4-H Scholarships: Jack Alfaro, Frankie Carpentieri, Jessa Carpentieri, Kendra Carpentieri, Sienna Carpentieri, Nathan Clum, Corra DiBlasi, Katie Drum, Ryder Fitzpatrick, Mia Henry, Kelsey Jenks, Margot LaPorte, Tessa Mashburn, Landon Mishk, Shea Montgomery, Vivien Padoleski, Ben Prentice, Joshua Pultz, Julia Raskopf, Natalie Shultz, Isabella Tropea and Macey Veeder-Shave.

# ROAD READY



Co-chair Bob Wilder welcomed drivers to his property for the start of the DLC Road Rally with fellow co-chairs Steven Benardete, Olivia Fussell and Ottavio Serena di Lapigio on Saturday, June 11th. Vintage car enthusiasts made their way to Lime Rock Park in Lakeville, CT, while the regional rally participants took the scenic route, playing local trivia along the way. Each group toured the stunning countryside as they drove alongside hundreds of acres of DLC forever-protected land. This year's finish line was the Temmile Distillery in Wassaic, where nearly 200 guests enjoyed a delicious lunch by Chef Eliza Glaister of Little Egg LLC. A tremendous thank you to our sponsors, Bank of Millbrook, Harney & Sons, Peter Pennoyer Architects, Mutual of America Group, Zimmer Brothers, Lime Rock Park, Pepe Auto Group, Precision Auto Storage and the Lantern Inn; Temmile Distillery owners, Eliza Dyson and Joel Levangia and their staff; Anthony Bellomo of Orangerie Garden + Home; our generous co-chairs and underwriters, and all who supported the 2022 Road Rally, helping the DLC raise more than \$200,000 to support our land conservation work. 🌿





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Founded in 1985, the Dutchess Land Conservancy (DLC) is a non-profit conservation organization dedicated to preserving the rural character, important resources and open lands of Dutchess County, New York. We encourage sound, well-planned growth, balanced with the conservation of our important natural resources and working landscapes to ensure healthy and vibrant communities for the benefit of all generations.

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You too can create a lasting legacy by remembering the Dutchess Land Conservancy in your estate plans. Your gift will ensure that important farms, open land, wildlife habitat, intact forests and beautiful scenic views that are so crucial to our rural way of life will be protected for generations to come.

*"If we dedicate ourselves to the long-term stewardship of this marvelous countryside, we will not only do a service to ourselves and to each other, but to future generations."*  
- Chauncey Stillman



Photography: Eric Prasecti



PETER PENNOYER ARCHITECTS

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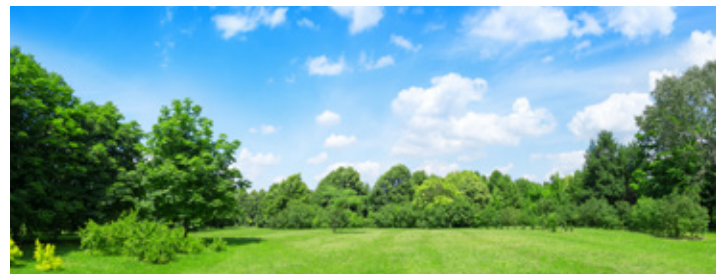
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Did you know that you can double the impact of your gift? Thousands of companies offer matching gift programs, which allow them to invest in the causes and charities that their employees are passionate about. Check with you employer and maximize your impact.



**We cherish this land.  
And the people who  
preserve it.**

Mutual of America Financial Group is proud to support the outstanding work of the **Dutchess Land Conservancy**.

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*The Dutchess Land  
Conservancy  
would like to thank  
Gayle and the late  
Jesse Bontecou  
for their donation of the  
Jesse and Gayle*

*Wildlife  
Conservation Preserve,  
site of the  
DLC Fall  
Country Luncheon.*

*We would also like to thank  
the Co-Chairs, Sponsors,  
Underwriters and the  
Silent Auction Donors of the  
Fall Country Luncheon!*



**DUTCHESS LAND  
CONSERVANCY**

The advertisement for Zimmer Brothers Jewelers features a close-up of a diamond ring with a large center stone and a pavé band, resting on a dark, reflective surface. The background is a soft-focus bokeh of colorful lights. The slogan "HEARTS ON FIRE" is written in white, with the tagline "THE WORLD'S MOST PERFECTLY CUT DIAMOND" underneath. Below the image, the text reads "ZIMMER BROTHERS JEWELERS SINCE 1893 Rhinebeck &amp; Poughkeepsie".

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The advertisement for Millbrook Equine features a silhouette of a horse's head and neck in profile, facing left, positioned above a horizontal line. Below the line, the text "MILLBROOK EQUINE" is written in a serif font. Underneath, the website "www.millbrookequine.com" is listed. The background of the advertisement is a photograph of a horse standing in a field, viewed through a wooden fence in the foreground. The scene is set in a rural, hilly area with trees and a fence line.



## DUTCHESS LAND CONSERVANCY

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