

KEEP IT WILD

"I don't think that men are often asked why they own forestland. I get asked that a lot."

Marli has a comfort in the woods that few women enjoy. For her, it's a place of solace, security, and safety. The woods are her home away from home. She readily admits that she is more leary of people than anything she could find in the woods. Marli actually owns two woodland parcels: one in Guilford where she lives and another in Eden. She made her first Eden purchase in 1997 and recalls that during the closing in Newport, she had pneumonia and a fever of 104. "It was about a year later that I returned, stood at the gate and thought, 'What have I done? I have no idea what to do here.'" Then she met Joe, who hailed from this area. The locals all knew about the sale, the beautiful pond, and potential house site so were curious to know what she planned to do. Marli's quick response to Joe's question, "Keep it wild!"

Fast forward through the next ten years. Marli and Joe got married and because of his connections to the town and money Marli inherited from her



grandfather, they acquired additional property as it became available until they owned 530 acres by 2006. "It was fun with Joe. He knew all about tractors and chainsaws. I knew about wildlife habitat improvement," she says. When it comes to the forest, Marli's first love is wildlife. She studied biology in college and wanted to become a conservation ecologist. Unfortunately, at the time she was in a very abusive relationship, both physically and mentally, and it sidetracked her dreams.

Marli's connection to and ethic about caring for the woods did not come from her upbringing as a city girl in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Rather, she has an innate caring for the planet as a whole and her forest management is an extension of that. She

recalls as a child running out of the house and sleeping under a tree because she loved the outdoors and it felt so safe. When asked where her deep conservation ethos came from she said, "I don't know that there's an answer to that question, really. Joe used to ask himself that same question. He grew up in a family where the forest was for hunting, logging, and four wheelers but with no long term management objectives. Yet he had such a different ethos. He wanted to improve it and protect it from development."

When she was twelve, her family moved to Seattle and later, Marli continued north to Fairbanks, Alaska where her son was born. Life was hard in Alaska and it prompted Marli to make a big change. In 1986, she ventured back east to live in a home her father owned in Guilford, Vermont. With all of her family still in the west, this was a very dramatic move. However, Vermont soon became Marli's true home where she has planted her roots. Marli's home in Guilford has a 40-acre woodland that she has carefully tended over the last four decades.

Marli and Joe did not stay married but they remained good friends until his recent death; Marli is now the sole owner of the Eden property. The land is in a trust and is conserved.

Eden is a bit of a rough and tumble town so Marli is not as comfortable here without Joe. "I'm not scared of the forest but I was actually a little scared to come up here alone because of the resentment toward us for prohibiting four wheelers," she says. Over time, it's gotten more comfortable for Marli as she says, "She's learned to evade people." But property damage has been an ongoing issue. Even while Joe

was alive, and working on the land, people would drive their ATVs around the gate and help themselves to whatever they wanted, including Joe's tools, and brush for making Christmas wreaths. Marli and Joe always welcomed hunters, horseback riders, hikers, and wildlife enthusiasts.

Marli has professional help in managing her land. Since wildlife habitat was her main interest when she started, she worked with a forester who favored wildlife and knew how to create habitat. They had a big harvest with a goal to improve habitat. "Joe used to call this place Noah's ark. There are beavers and bears and there was a northern goshawk that nested." Marli had an encounter with that goshawk who swooped aggressively at her while she was out walking. As she sped up to escape, she realized that she was heading right toward the nest. After the harvest, she noticed more little mammals running around. An Audubon employee came up and did a bird survey and found all "12 responsibility" bird species. "It's just results like that that make me so happy."

Today, Marli is still working with a forester. Her main objective is still wildlife habitat. She goes on to say that the forest doesn't need to make money to have value to her, but she feels that its economic value needs to be

recognized for society to value forests. And, she also recognizes that to achieve her wildlife goals, timber harvests are needed to generate income that funds some non-income producing wildlife work.

As an absentee landowner, Marli faces particular challenges. There was a dirt road that went across the property connecting two county roads. Locals were in the habit of using it as a shortcut. Also, since the property seemed unattended and had a road, many four wheelers would take advantage and use it as “a big four wheeler park.” She tells a story about meeting a pick-up truck on one of her dirt roads and stopping to talk to the driver. His response, she says, was “Oh, you own this. I didn’t think anybody owned it.” Sadly, Marli gated off the road due to vandalism. “When you ask people not to use motorized vehicles, they just bash the gates, or they chainsaw a trail around the gate. It turned into this whole class warfare thing. And of course, I was the lady from “New York” who bought this and didn’t understand anything.”

Today, Joe’s cousin Shane has become the caretaker for the property and spends a lot of time there. He does the mowing, the trail work, maintains the fences and other required maintenance. He even put in an outhouse with a tank.

A regular presence on the land helps with access issues because it doesn’t sit idle for long periods of time.” And Shane has done a better job of keeping people off the property. “He feels like he’s protecting his cousin’s interest as well as his own ability to hunt on the land.” Shane’s wife and son also enjoy the land, working, hunting, and recreating with him.

Joe was partnered with Marli when it came to working on and envisioning the future of the property. “So, I was really hopeful that Joe and I would be doing landscaping or trails for people and working out in the woods together. We did a lot here. And also Joe, this was his heart.” They did plant hundreds of little trees: mountain ash, viburnum, some black walnut, and black oaks. Some have survived but the deer got to many of them.



Marli leading a cordage workshop.

They did a ton of apple tree release on the 200 or so apple trees. This work was part of a project funded by a Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program — or WHIP — grant offered by Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS).

Marli has considered selling the Eden property since Joe’s passing. Between Joe’s death, the difficulty keeping motorized vehicles off, and the distance from her home, the thought of selling has crossed her mind now and again. On the other hand, things have been better since Shane has started keeping an eye on the property. And the land holds many special places. “There are fields that we cleared and a beaver pond with a beautiful spring. So many quiet places that are tucked away from the noise of traffic.” But the pond that sits in the center is still the heart of the property. “And the fall foliage is amazing,” says Marli.

As an owner of multiple properties in two regions of the state, Marli has worked with more than one forester. In Guilford, she had a female consulting forester, one of very few in the state for many years. She remembers liking the fact that she was a female but also credits her with being a good businesswoman who helped her through the timber harvest, taking full charge of hiring the logger and writing the contract. When asked if she has experienced gender bias, Marli offered, “I don’t think that men are often asked why they own forestland. I get asked that a lot.”

A chainsaw is not Marli’s favorite tool. “There’s a lot to using a chainsaw, and it’s not just about strength; I’m just not that spatially aware. But I have a Stihl

straight blade pruning saw that can cut through six inches.” It’s not a power tool, just hand held, but Marli finds it useful for lots of cleaning-up kind of jobs. She also has a billy goat, or DR brush mower that she uses for bigger jobs. And she bought a pick-up truck that helps with a lot of hauling. “I pulled a lot of bittersweet in Guilford,” says Marli, and “Frankly, hands are the best tool. After a rainstorm, especially if you’re in forest soil, the roots grow horizontally and you can peel them up, rather than breaking them off.” Marli shows distinct pleasure in mentioning these “trophy roots with all the little white ones still attached.” But, on her Guilford property she also had to tackle honeysuckle and buckthorn that had been growing forever. She mentioned a big long, iron lever that works on buckthorn where there’s a central root and you can get under it to pull it out. Even with careful pulling, Marli finds this to be agonizing work that requires constant monitoring to keep all the sprouts from growing again. She got a really good handle on the introduced species in Guilford; and then the people around her started getting sick and needed her attention. Marli breathes a sigh of relief that the Eden property is fairly free of introduced species. “It’s primarily just the knotweed there,” she says.

Marli gets her information from a variety of sources. "I do a lot of Internet browsing. There are wonderful articles and videos, many of which are made in Vermont." She also has several different Facebook groups, like for native plants and basketry, and tons of books. "I think being on the VWA board was incredibly valuable because I learned a lot about who's who, what's what, and different organizations," Marli says. She also served on the Windham Regional Woodlands Association board and her local conservation commission. On the flip side, she remembers being in the minority on the board as either the only woman or one of two women. "It could have been gender discrimination or just that I had different ideas but few people talked to me. I did OK though because I'm used to being the only woman in the room."

Marli reflected on her first introduction to Women and our Woods back in 2012 where the experience of being with and other women woodland owners was very inspiring. "One woman was too scared to go onto the land; another had just lost her husband," says Marli. "It was incredible to share stories with other women and hear their experiences. It was inspirational." Everyone views the world differently and has different

experiences. That's what resonates with Marli. She has a science background but a big heart and her approach to forest management makes room for both. She can enjoy the beauty of the forest or the softness of the Sphagnum moss that cries out to be petted while still managing her land to protect what she cherishes. She does, however, recognize that our lifetimes are very short and the ability to protect anything is pretty limited. "So, you just do the best you can. That's all you can do," she says.

When asked what she would recommend to other women thinking of buying property, Marli says "I think if you really just want to appreciate nature, you should go to a state park. It's hard to own land and you really have to be willing to join in as a force of nature." Marli finds that there is sometimes a "party line" about how you need to manage your land and it may not resonate with all women. "Spend time observing, reading, attending forestry events and walks in the woods. There's so much teaching and learning available in Vermont," she says.

The woods are a refuge for Marli, a place to escape the world and some of its accompanying heartbreak. With a somewhat philosophical bent, Marli reflects on her own experience,

"What's beautiful is getting old, seeing things change and seeing things familiar, and seeing that the trees are doing that with you."

