

Conservation group looks to rewild Skowhegan preserve

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By Taylor Abbott

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SKOWHEGAN — A retired physician hopes efforts to convert a recently donated field to its natural state will create an educational space for residents to visit and enjoy.

Dr. Ann Dorney, a member of Skowhegan-based Somerset Woods Trustees, began her efforts about a year ago to rewild the Parsons Family Preserve. The 27-acre property is about a half-mile up Malbons Mills Road from the Kennebec River and Route 2.

The Parsons Family Preserve was given to Somerset Woods Trustees in 2016 by the Parsons family, which has roots in Skowhegan that date to the years after the American Revolution, according to information at the Somerset Woods Trustees website.

“I had been assigned as the steward of the Parsons Family Preserve about three years ago,” Dorney said, “but when I retired a year ago, I started looking in more detail at Parsons and what was growing there.”

Dorney has been asked to turn the fields into a pollinator garden, a process called rewilding.

There is increasing attention being paid to rewilding, which has more of a following in Europe, and “the importance of native plants on biodiversity,” according to Dorney.

“I realized that that was something we could do there,” she said, adding, “I would define (rewilding) as restoring an environment to its natural state to encourage native plants and animals.”

Dorney said she has learned of the unusual native prairie plants on the property, including little bluestem grass and the flax-leaved stiff aster, a daisy-like flower. By the end of summer, the colors of plants like the flax-leaved stiff give off a blueish hue across the fields.

The field is also home to vernal pools, which are seasonal pools of water that are home to distinctive plants and animals, including tadpoles.



Dr. Ann Dorney plants a red maple tree recently as she works to rewild the Wesserunsett Stream Preserve, which is adjacent to the Parsons Family Preserve in Skowhegan. *Rich Abrahamson/Morning Sentinel*

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In her work at the field, Dorney said she has learned to collect seeds from native plants, some of which she has donated to the Wild Seed Project, a nonprofit that connects landowners with skills and resources to repopulate landscapes with native plants.

“In the process,” she said, “I have looked at trying to establish rare native plants to the field, discovered the Wild Seed Project and donated to them from this field.”

Dorney has also learned to plant butternuts and chestnuts.

“(I’ve been able) to enjoy watching the many different bees, butterflies and other insects and bugs on Parsons,” Dorney said.

Parsons Field is one of several properties owned by Somerset Woods Trustees, and it abuts the group’s Malbon’s Woods. The field is to be maintained as a pollinator preserve and includes an existing trail that loops through the woods.



Dr. Ann Dorney digs recently before planting a red maple tree as she works to rewild the Wesserunnett Stream Preserve, which is adjacent to the Parsons Family Preserve in Skowhegan. *Rich Abrahamson/Morning Sentinel*

“Hopefully, we can create a space that many people will enjoy for years, and help our pollinators and birds in the process,” Dorney said.

Dorney said by June, she plans to have finished planting more than a dozen types of native flowers and two chestnut trees, along with elderberry, dogwood and potentilla shadbush. The chestnut trees were planted to honor Warren Balgooyen, the group's botanist, who died at 79 in 2019.

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"I think that my retirement allowed me to have time to work on the project," Dorney said. "I spent my childhood chasing butterflies and catching frogs and turtles, have always enjoyed looking at critters no matter how small and I have gardened for years."

Somerset Woods Trustees works to protect land in Somerset County that has significant natural or cultural resources and to manage them sustainably. The group is governed by a 12-member board that includes Dorney.

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