

LVJ Article – August, 2025

## Conservation Commission Corner

A quarterly letter from the Conservation Commission

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the Salisbury Conservation Commission's quarterly missive. The SCC is a new town committee formed to advise and support, but not make policy on, the many wonderful environmental resources we have in town. It's a win-win commission!

One of its goals is education; educating SCC members and fellow Salisburyans on the unique natural habitats specific to our beautiful and fascinating town and how to preserve them.

In these quarterly missives, the SCC will take shallow dives into topics germane to an environmentally engaged community and that celebrate our town's unique ecological features. In the future, please look for articles on vernal pools, upland habitats, core forests, tax breaks, etc.

We would like to be interactive, so please send topic suggestions and comments to [leepotter@salsiburyct.gov](mailto:leepotter@salsiburyct.gov).

### The Understory is Making Headlines

Recently the Salisbury Conservation Commission was treated to a walk through the woods with a number of forestry experts including First Selectman, Curtis Rand; Department of Energy & Environmental Protection foresters, Gerald Milne and Jill Humphreys, as well as The Connecticut Nature Conservancy's director of Saugatuck Preserves, Cynthia Fowx. These experts focused on the understory, the supporting cast of our local forests that is fascinating and complex. Here's a little about what we learned.

We are lucky to be living in the Salisbury-Lakeville area, especially from an ecological standpoint. It has many diverse habitats that protect and encourage biodiversity. One of these important habitats is the understory or the plant life that is happy living in the shaded layer between the earth and the trees' canopy. In Salisbury we have the potential for wonderful understory in the roughly 15,000 acres of forest in our borders. (There are about 38,500 acres total in town.)

What happens in the understory habitat? Thanks to Susan Bergen's March 5, 2024, blog, we gain some insight: *A robin nests in a holly bush. A bumblebee savors meadowsweet pollen. A wild turkey gobbled down the dark blue berries on the maple leaf viburnum. A swallowtail butterfly lays her eggs on a spicebush leaf. A red fox bounds away into the thick underbrush. It is all happening in the understory... Most canopy trees in the eastern forest are wind-pollinated, while many understory plants depend on insects to pollinate their flowers. These plants offer nectar and pollen and host insect larvae. After pollination, the resulting fruits, berries, and seeds feed birds and wildlife. Songbirds that feed near or on the ground, such as cardinals, grosbeaks, robins, and goldfinches, build cup-shaped nests in low bushes within ten feet of the ground. The hermit thrush often nests directly on the ground, as do oven birds and game birds, such as wild turkeys. Understory vegetation helps camouflage the nests and protects the safety of the eggs, hatchlings, and brooding adults. The thick brush also harbors many mammals, such as foxes, coyotes, bobcats, and the small animals they prey on. In addition, standing dead trees and decomposing wood on the forest floor provides food and shelter for insects and fungi that help form the base of the food chain.*

As you can see, the understory is action-packed, but it does have stressors on it. When you are hiking, notice if you can see through the woods, if each tree trunk is its own sentinel with no green at its feet. If so, chances are the important shade loving native plants that grow between 2 inches to 20 feet have been munched on by whitetail deer as saplings or have been outcompeted by the non-native invasives such as

Japanese barberry, winged euonymus and multiflora rose for early spring light and water.

Another stressor on the understory are people. A park-like aesthetic for our woods, where one magnificent trunk after another, provides a vertical structure that is architectural - almost modern - in its appearance and is tidy, is compelling and something perhaps we admire in the English landscape. After our walk with the foresters, however, we are converts to a softer and messier look under our trees knowing that that understory is providing habitat for many critters essential to our wellbeing as well as providing erosion control, water filtration and hospitable seeding grounds.

For your own wooded area in need of an understory, here is a great list of plants to start with:

[https://www.wiltonct.gov/sites/g/files/vyh1if10026/f/uploads/native\\_shrubs\\_final\\_.pdf](https://www.wiltonct.gov/sites/g/files/vyh1if10026/f/uploads/native_shrubs_final_.pdf)

An inspiring read on the transformation of a habitat by introducing native plants is this interview with Doug Tallamy:

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/meet-ecologist-who-wants-unleash-wild-backyard-180974372/>

Beautiful sunny meadows are cropping up all over town, which is so exciting, but let's not forget the quiet cousin under the trees, the less noticed but just as important to biodiversity understory.