

NORTHEASTERN CAVE CONSERVANCY NEWS



Vol. 28, No 2, June 2026



The Northeastern Cave Conservancy, Inc. (NCC) is a nonprofit committed to the conservation, study, management, and acquisition of caves and karst areas having significant geological, hydrological, biological, recreational, historical, or aesthetic features. To these ends, the NCC combines the resources and expertise of affiliated cave explorers, educators, scientists, landowners, and conservation officials. The NCC programs are focused mainly on the preservation of caves and karst. Outreach includes education in schools and local communities, establishment of park spaces on karstlands, and educational messages about the significance of groundwater pollution on this sensitive underground ecosystem. NCC members assist in the exploration, survey, and protection of these natural resources, and manage them so you can explore them yourself.

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President Leslie Hatfield president@necaveconservancy.org	Vice President Kevin Dumont vicepresident@necaveconservancy.org	Treasurer Ben Brown treasurer@necaveconservancy.org	Secretary Ramon Armen secretary@necaveconservancy.org
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*On the cover: Bob Simmons, Leslie Hatfield, Martha Burke-Hennessy, and Michael Belknap at Merlins closing. Photo by Michael Lynch.
Left: Knox Gunbarrel. Photo by Adriane Hectus Towle.
Back cover: Knox Cave. Photo by Erik Nieman.*



Merlins Update

It's Official! The Merlins Cave Preserve Has Doubled in Size!

By Leslie Hatfield

It's official! After nearly a year and a half of fundraising, the NCC has met its goal, and the closing on the Merlins Expansion took place on Friday, June 5, 2026. This acquisition protects an additional 35.32 acres of karst, forest, and two small caves, bringing the Merlins Preserve to more than 71 acres, with five caves and numerous sinks. The parking area and trail access are now part of the preserve, and the current two-mile round-trip trail will be expanded to create additional hiking opportunities.

The NCC originally purchased the 35.69-acre forested parcel from the Belknap family in 2011 to protect Merlins Cave. Merlins Cave and the other caves on the property were formed in the Stockbridge Marble, with Merlins remaining in almost pristine condition. In April of 2024, Michael Belknap contacted Chuck Porter, the NCC's previous Acquisitions Chair, to inquire whether the organization would be interested in purchasing any of the adjoining land. Chuck, Mike Belknap, and Bob Simmons hiked the area on April 28, 2024 and talked long about the caves, the land, and its history, and Mike's love for it all.

Mike Belknap and his wife Martha Burke-Hennessy offered the NCC as much of the remaining portions of their 132 acres adjacent to the Merlins Preserve as we wanted for a below market value price. The resulting 35-acre addition includes all of the frontage on Tunnel Hill Road, the existing access trail, parking, and kiosk, as well as some of the most beautiful parts of the hillside and all the known or likely karst.

In April of 2026, the Town of Canaan Planning Board approved the lot line revision, clearing the way to closing the purchase. This acquisition ensures that none of this land can be developed in the future.

Thank you to everyone who donated in support of this purchase. If you're in the area, stop by Merlins Cave Preserve to walk the land and spend time in this beautiful oak, sugar maple, and karst landscape. If you plan to visit the caves, be sure to contact the Preserve Managers in advance to obtain a permit.

In the words of Michael Belknap, "Thank you for the decision of the Northeastern Cave Conservancy to expand its Merlins Cave Property...the preservation of this property for public use and education provides an inexpressible happiness."



*Martha Burke-Hennessy and Michael Belknap at the closing.
Photo by Leslie Hatfield.*

A sincere THANK YOU to the following contributors who made the Merlins expansion possible!

- | | |
|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Nicholas Aikey | Andrew Ingalls |
| Russell Arcuri | Morgan Ingalls |
| Ramon Armen | Ethan Johnson |
| Joe Armstrong | Joseph Kelly |
| Teddy Benoit | Steven King |
| Norm Berg | Deven Lampron |
| Mitchell Berger | Amy Lauterbach |
| Larry Bernier | Richard Lester |
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| Peter Haberland | Anonymous |
| Harold Hahn | 2025 NSS Convention |
| Leslie Hatfield | HHG |
| Adriane Hectus Towle | Met Grotto |
| Devon Hedges | NRO |
| Elizabeth Henson | Niagara Frontier Grotto |
| Olivia Hinkley | TRA |
| Jon Hollman | VCA |
| Andrew Hudson | |



Chuck Porter and Michael Belknap making the first walk of the new Merlins land in April 2024. Photo by Bob Simmons.



Merlins closing: Bob Simmons, Michael Lynch Esq., and Leslie Hatfield. Photo by Martha Burke-Hennessy.

**We apologize if we have missed the names of anybody who donated but are not listed here.
Your contribution is appreciated!**



NCC Updates

June 2026 Trustee Election Results

This year's election had two candidates running for three open trustee positions. Both running candidates were elected, leaving one currently unfilled trustee position.

Morgan Ingalls and Erik Nieman were re-elected to their positions as Board Trustees to serve terms of three years each.



Morgan Ingalls



Erik Nieman

NCC Friends and Neighbors Day

August 1st, 2026

Save the date for the NCC Friends and Neighbors Day,
formerly Members' Appreciation Day!

Celebrate Cave and Karst Conservation

Saturday, August 1st

11 a.m. - 3 p.m.



Notes from the Underground: Partnerships for Greater Land Protection

by Leslie Hatfield

On May 13, 2026, the Land Trust Alliance hosted the 2026 New York Land Conservation Conference in Glens Falls, New York. The annual conference brought together more than 200 attendees from land trusts across New York State to share best practices, explore innovative approaches, and strengthen partnerships through networking and collaboration.

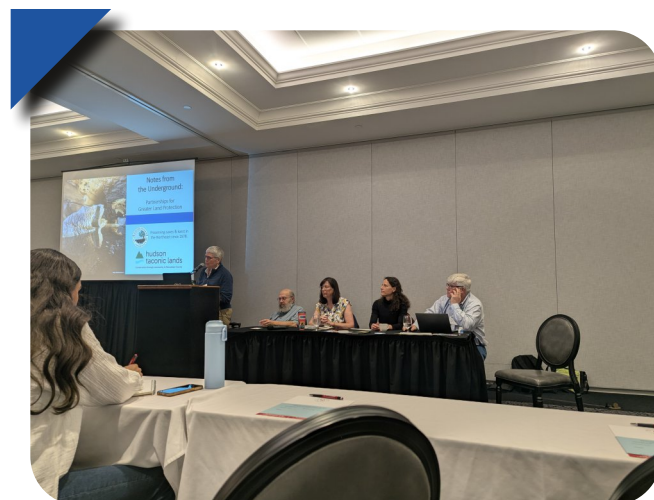
The Northeastern Cave Conservancy (NCC) was the only volunteer land trust represented among this year's conference presenters. Thom Engel, Cara Gentry, Bob Simmons, and Leslie Hatfield delivered a session titled Notes from the Underground: Partnership for Greater Land Protection. They were joined by Annie Jacobs, Communications Director for Hudson Taconic Lands, for an afternoon presentation on the value of well-planned partnerships. The session highlighted how collaboration can help organizations maximize the conservation value of their lands while expanding public access and protecting biodiversity.

Many of the session's approximately 70 attendees were unaware, before reviewing the session schedule, that a land trust focused specifically on caves and karst even existed. During the presentation, the speakers addressed questions about the significance of caves and karst in New York State and explained why their conservation matters, particularly for protecting drinking water supplies and ecosystems that support rare—and in some cases endangered—species.

After the conference, a representative from an organization that owns land with caves reached out to explore potential partnership opportunities with the NCC, including ownership, management, or consultation, as the organization considers the best path forward. Hopefully, the NCC will have more to share on this sometime soon, so stay tuned.



Thom Engel, Bob Simmons, Leslie Hatfield, Cara Gentry, and Annie Jacobs. Photo by Annie Jacobs.



Leslie Hatfield, Thom Engel, Cara Gentry, Annie Jacobs, and Bob Simmons. Photo by Drake McDonough.



Preserve Updates

Ella Armstrong Cave Preserve

by Erik Nieman



The NCC acquired Ella Armstrong Cave in 2004, but it has a history dating back to at least 1808.

The cave acquired its name as a result of one of the chiseled signatures in the flowstone near the 23-foot entrance drop being misinterpreted. During a mapping trip, Art Palmer recorded numerous signatures and dates carved into the cave in various places. “ELLABM2BONG” was carved into flowstone. Art wrote this down and after some puzzling, he realized that the “Bs” were simply florid versions of “R” and the “2” was a backward “S.” Arbitrarily doubling the “A,” he came up with “Ella Armstrong,” and hence “Ella Armstrong Cave.”

Since its acquisition in 2004, the cave has seen a marked increase in visitation. In conversations with Mrs. Robinson, then-owner of Knox Cave, she spoke of frequent visitation to the cave during the previous century, (Mrs. Robinson was born in 1888) but after Knox Cave Road was paved, and the primary entrance to the cave up till that point in time was covered by the road construction, the cave fell into obscurity for decades.

Ella Armstrong Cave is along Knox Cave Road, not far from Knox Cave. Knox Cave Road was originally a dirt path, and did not see much traffic. As a result of the Robinsons opening Knox Cave for commercial tours, and the resulting increase in traffic, Knox Cave Road saw progressive improvements to the road surface to accommodate the increasing traffic to the show cave. Sometime in the 1940s, the road was paved and the main entrance to Ella Armstrong Cave was covered. The entrance that visitors use now was historically not used, as it is a vertical entrance requiring ropes and equipment. The now-covered entrance was a simple 15-foot chimney, easily climbable for those wishing to explore the cave. Since 2004, the preserve has seen multiple improvements, including the construction of a trail from the parking area to the cave entrance, an information kiosk, and some shoring of the sinkhole opposite the cave entrance.

During the earlier days of visitation to Ella Armstrong in recent history, cavers would rig a rope outside the cave to a tree, and then run the rope the length of the entrance passage to the 23-foot drop inside the cave. After the NCC acquired it, rigging bolts were installed at the cave drop so that ropes could be rigged directly rather than 100 feet away. Last year, a traverse line was installed to aid with bypassing the constriction that precedes the drop.

The Ella Armstrong Cave Preserve is the NCC’s smallest preserve at just under 1 acre, but she sees a fair amount of visitors every year who enjoy seeing the tall trunk passage that makes up the majority of the cave, as well as the interesting side passages and dome climb. Of course, for the more adventurous caver, there is the climb up into the chimney where one can get a better look at the underside of Knox Cave Rd.



Photos by Erik Nieman.



Spring 2026 NRO

Spring 2026 Northeastern Regional Organization (NRO) Field Meet by Garrett Gay

The Spring 2026 NRO Field Meet, co-hosted by the Northeastern Cave Conservancy (NCC) and the Central Connecticut Grotto (CCG), was held on May 15th – 17th and was a rousing success. The final count was 204 people registered to attend and over 100 people participated in led trips during the weekend.

There was a fantastic mix of veteran local cavers and cavers new to the area or new to the sport who attended.

The weekend kicked off with a brief presentation entitled “Alphabet Soup,” describing the various acronyms and organizations related to caving, specifically in the Northeast. The aim of the presentation was to inform new and veteran cavers alike about the groups that make up organized caving in the region and how the different groups can support caving and cavers.

This was followed by trip signups, which although hectic, did not result in fisticuffs, which is generally a time-honored tradition.

After a delicious breakfast Saturday morning, provided by the good folks at the Northern New Jersey Grotto (NNJG), caving trips departed. Trips on Saturday varied in length and rigor, allowing all attendees to cave according to their skill and comfort level.

The evening was kicked off with a dinner provided by Eat Dirt Catering which did not disappoint, and was exactly what a body, tired by a solid day of caving, needed.



Following the dinner was the NCC auction, where used caving, camping, and outdoor gear go to find a second life. This particular auction was a very special event, as much of the donated gear belonged to the legendary Art and Peg Palmer whose contributions to geology and caving in the Northeast cannot be understated. Much of the donated gear went to young cavers, an exciting sign indicating that our caving community is going strong. The auction resulted in an additional \$2,000 being donated to the Merlins Cave expansion project.

The auction was then followed by (after many issues with a particular inflatable projector screen) an absolutely stunning presentation by Kevin Downey, who gave attendees a glimpse into the numerous expeditions to Brazil he has undertaken and

photographed. The photographs and stories highlighted not only the world-class caving in Brazil, but the abundant and varied wildlife, and human history of the caves visited. The evidence of human presence in those Brazilian caves gives us pause to reflect on our own caving experiences and how our interests connect with those long since passed. Many thanks to Kevin for giving a presentation that was of national convention quality.

Sunday morning breakfast was also provided by Eat Dirt Catering, which was followed by the Sunday morning trips heading out and the NRO meeting.

Additional excitement was added to the weekend by calls for assistance in McFails Cave on Saturday and Merlins Cave on Sunday. A big thank you to all those who assisted the caver who had trouble exiting McFails Cave and the rescue in Merlins Cave. Many folks spent a lot of time on Saturday and Sunday evenings lending a hand. The swift response to each event with such knowledgeable folks is a credit to the caver community in the Northeast.

A special thank you to the NRO, CCG, and NNJG for donating some or all of their share of the earnings from the Field Meet to the NCC, which totaled approximately \$1,760. Thanks are due as well to Walmart for a \$500 grant for the event, Stewart's Shops for donating much of the food for the Saturday Breakfast, and the NRO for an additional \$1,500 donation toward the Merlins Cave expansion project.

It is also important to thank the hardworking and friendly folks from the New York Parks Department, who continue to go above and beyond to help make the NRO Field Meet held at Thompson's Lake Campground so special.

Overall, the Spring 2026 NRO Field Meet was a great event, with caving, learning, and camaraderie aplenty. The event showcased the northeastern community and hopefully helped to cement some new folks as lifelong cavers!



Photos by Steve Millett, Jeff Parson, Elliot Bushman, and Mike Warner.

2026 Spring NRO

Co-hosts: Central Connecticut Grotto & Northeastern Cave Conservancy

There were 204 registered participants, over 100 led cave trips, and many self-led cave trips. The Saturday evening auction raised \$2,030 for the Northeastern Cave Conservancy's expansion of the Merlins Cave Preserve in Columbia County, NY.

We would like to thank the following organizations and individuals for making the event possible:

- Central Connecticut Grotto (CCG) & The Northeastern Cave Conservancy (NCC) for hosting - Veronica Sassu, Garrett Gay, & crew
- All trip leaders & Steve Millett for organizing
- Northern New Jersey Grotto (NNJG) - Saturday breakfast
- Eat Dirt Catering (Emily Davis & co.) - Saturday dinner, Sunday breakfast
- NCC Auction - Many thanks to everyone who donated goods to the auction, those who helped run the auction, & Bill Folsom aka Merlin the Auctioneer!
- Alphabet Soup Presentation - Garrett Gay
- Cave Rescue Crew [McFails] - Rico Neumann, Peter Haberland, Peter Welles, Julian Benson, Erik Nieman, & Peter Brown
- Cave Rescue Crew [Merlins] - Canaan Fire Department, Red Rock Fire, Chatham Rescue Squad, Lebanon Valley Fire Department, John Gullen (NYS Forest Ranger), Emily Davis, Greg Moore, Mike Warner, Jacob Morris-Siegel, Mitch Berger, Erik Nieman, Ramon Armen, Mike Chu, Morgan Ingalls (remote), John Dunham (remote)
- NCC booth - Leslie Hatfield, Thom Engel, Ellen Schwartz, Cara Gentry, Erik Nieman, Bob Simmons, & Mitch Berger
- Speleobooks - Mike Warner, Emily Davis, Peter Haberland
- Featured presentation - Kevin Downy
- Thompson's Lake State Park - Dianne O'Hara, Campground Supervisor, & staff
- Thacher State Park - Carley Kiernan, Park Manager
- Thom Engel - NCC liaison to Thacher Park
- Stewart's Shops - Food donations to support the meals
- Walmart - Tim McLaughlin, Store Manager, Cobleskill Walmart - Monetary donation to support the event
- Everyone who stayed under 10mph and didn't get us yelled at by the Rangers



Photos by Mike Warner.

Merlins Cave Rescue - Sunday of Spring NRO 2026

by Erik Nieman

This rescue received a fair amount of press and social media coverage. Here is a brief summary of what took place, without the media sensationalism and exaggerated facts.

A caver was freed after being stuck in a tight section (Bear Trap) of Merlins Cave on Sunday, May 17, 2026, for approximately seven hours. After being freed from the obstruction, the individual was able to leave the cave under his own power. The caver was on a permitted trip with a group of seven cavers. After a complete evaluation by EMS personnel and two Albany Medical Center REMO doctors on site, it was determined that the individual did not require hospitalization.

Many thanks to all of the agencies involved for a successful rescue. The rescue was a coordinated effort between the Canaan Fire Department, the Albany-Schoharie Cave Rescue Team, Red Rock Fire, Chatham Rescue Squad, a NYS Forest Ranger trained in cave rescue, along with the Lebanon Valley Protective Association, specialists from the NYS DHS, and REMO (Regional Emergency Medical Organization) doctors. Thank you to the Town of Canaan Supervisor, Brenda Adams, for providing food and beverages to the first responders.



Photos by Mike Warner.



How to Help

Join the
NCC!

Annual membership levels:

Regular \$20
 Regular + 1 Family \$25
 Regular + 2 Family \$30
 Regular + 3 Family \$35
 Benefactor \$50
 Institutional \$100
 Life Membership \$400
 Family Life Membership \$125

All checks made payable and sent to:

Northeastern Cave Conservancy, Inc.
 P.O. Box 254
 Schoharie, N.Y. 12157
www.necaveconservancy.org



Giving to the NCC at Work

Many employers offer the opportunity to have donations deducted directly from your paycheck. Some even offer a corporate match of employee donations.

The NCC can be found on multiple corporate giving platforms. For businesses in the private sector, Benevity is commonly used. For New York State employees, donations can be directed to the NCC through the United Way campaign. Check to see if your employer offers directed donations and especially if they offer matching. It's a great way to support the NCC!

If you find your employer offers a directed donation option where the NCC doesn't appear, please reach out to treasurer@necaveconservancy.org to see if we can get us added.



Photos by Erik Nieman.



The Northeastern Cave Conservancy News is published quarterly by the Northeastern Cave Conservancy, Inc. The Northeastern Cave Conservancy promotes the study and preservation of speleologically significant properties in the northeastern United States. The Newsletter editor accepts submissions via editor@necaveconservancy.org.



Open Positions

Nominating Committee Chair

The Northeastern Cave Conservancy (NCC) invites applications for the position of Nominating Committee Chair. This is a volunteer leadership role effective January 2027; an earlier start date may be negotiated to facilitate a smooth transition.

Requirements

- Must be a current member of the NCC and maintain active membership throughout the duration of the committee chair appointment.
- Must not currently serve on the NCC Board of Trustees, nor plan to seek a Board position while serving as Committee Chair.
- Demonstrated proficiency in standard office software, specifically email and spreadsheet management.
- Strong organizational capability and a proven ability to adhere to strict, time-sensitive deadlines.

Responsibilities

- Coordinate and present a slate of qualified candidates for the annual Spring Board Trustee election.
- Oversee the administration of the Trustee election process, including the management of voting systems and the reporting of results.
- Assist in the election of NCC Officers as required.
- Uphold the integrity and validity of the election process by ensuring all procedures are conducted fairly and transparently.
- Proactively identify and implement improvements to the voting and nomination process.
- Maintain consistent and professional communication with the NCC Board of Trustees.

Commitment

- The primary workload is seasonal, centering on the management of the annual Spring Trustee election, which spans from January through the first week of June.

How to apply

- Send a brief email (resume is not needed) that expresses your interest in the position to: Leslie Hatfield at president@necaveconservancy.org
- If you have questions, please contact: Norm Berg at nominating@necaveconservancy.org



Membership Chair

The NCC is seeking volunteers for the role of Membership Chair. For more information, contact Leslie at l.hatfield@necaveconservancy.org.

The Membership Chair recruits and retains members, manages membership records, ensures timely renewals, and promotes long-term commitments. The Membership Chair also organizes the Member Appreciation Day and encourages participation in NCC activities.

Volunteer Value by Vince Kappler

The volunteer effort reported by members as of the May 20 deadline for my June report is: 287 hours on task with an additional 34 hours driving 2148 miles for a total value of \$12,152.00 working on NCC projects. This is a ten-fold increase in what was reported in my mid-February report. Additional hours were received after the report was submitted and will be included in the next reporting cycle.

The VV reporting form on the website is back in service. The IT team rebuilt the email system and the VV link is working well. Members preferring to send data directly can still use my personal email vkappler@ptd.net. All submissions received will be acknowledged by return email.



Volunteering at Sellecks Karst Preserve. Photos by Erik Nieman and Kevin Dumont.



Northeast cavers have a 50+ year history of working to understand and preserve karst features in the region. More recently, the NCC has taken the lead in the protection, exploration, scientific investigation, conservation, and preservation of cave and karst resources in our area. Besides owning several properties, the NCC manages property for other agencies, has made presentations to local governments concerning land use, contributed to environmental impact studies, and advised local property owners on living with their karst properties. All of this work has and continues to be done by volunteers. By assigning dollar values to our volunteer work and adding up the sums, we can create the documentation that can be used for cave management proposals and karst protection battles. This documentation will also add support for any applications the NCC may make for federal, state, or private grants. The documentation may also be of value when used to calculate charitable contributions for income tax purposes.

What
is
Volunteer
Value?

