



Thomas Lindsay

STILL GOING STRONG

— Five Rivers celebrates 40 years of connecting New Yorkers to nature

By Craig Thompson and Gina Jack

This June, Five Rivers Environmental Education Center celebrates its 40th anniversary. A one-of-a-kind environmental education and cultural resource center, Five Rivers is located on 455 acres on the outskirts of Delmar in Albany County. The property is a popular spot where

Nick Drahos



area residents and visitors find a medley of natural habitats linked by 10 miles of nature trails, with convenient access to view and learn from this natural diversity.

What we now call Five Rivers Center started out in 1933 as the Delmar Experimental Game Farm, one of half a dozen

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game farms operated by the (then) New York State Conservation Department which were dedicated primarily to the propagation of (and additionally in the case of Five Rivers, the study of) upland game birds. From 1933-36, Civilian Conservation Corps Camp S-72 also occupied

Joseph Corbett



From 1966-71, what is now the visitor center was used as a sign shop for the Delmar Zoo (pictured at right).



Public education has been a focus of DEC's Five Rivers Center for its entire 40-year history.

the grounds, assisting in the operation of the game farm. In 1941, the Wildlife Resource Laboratory was established and began innovative field work with other game species such as waterfowl, white-tailed deer and snowshoe hare.

Public interest in, and access to, the game farm began to increase in 1948 when game farm staffer Clint Bishop started to assemble a small menagerie of animals in outdoor cages. Several abandoned barracks from the site's former CCC camp were remodeled as public exhibition areas. This exhibition became known locally as the Delmar Zoo. For more than 20 years, thousands of school groups and families enjoyed this collection, thereby establishing a vibrant connection between the community and the facility.

The proposed abandonment of the game farm and zoo in 1970 and, more importantly, the potential dissolution of the special bond that had developed with the community, gave rise in the fall of 1971 to the charitable, not-for-profit corporation Five Rivers Limited (a.k.a. "Friends of Five Rivers," which recently

celebrated its 40th anniversary as well). This citizens support group's strong advocacy to keep this vital relationship alive ultimately resulted in the establishment of the Environmental Education Center in 1972.

The Friends group provides an extraordinary range of opportunities for citizen involvement and participation at the Center, reminding all that the true focus of the Center's operations is not the trees or the trails; rather it is the people who share a strong commitment to environmental stewardship working together. This strong public/private partnership continues as DEC and the Friends work hand-in-hand to ensure the success of the site as an outdoor classroom for all ages, a place to find quiet respite from the busy day, a community asset for recreation, and an island for wildlife in an ever-encroaching suburban community.

Visitors to Five Rivers are hard-pressed to go away empty-handed if they're looking for wildlife viewing opportunities. Deer and squirrels are a common sight, while turtles and frogs delight

visitors in the warmer months. Locals know that it's one of the best places in the area, year-round, to spot New York's state bird, the eastern bluebird—especially along a trail of bluebird nest boxes. More recently, wild turkeys have become a fixture on the landscape. Birding enthusiasts will find more than 225 species on record at Five Rivers.

Citizen science programs play a strong part in the array of public programs offered each year at Five Rivers. Visitors receive training and hands-on guidance in how to participate in programs including Woodcock Watch, FrogWatch, Firefly Watch, Butterfly Census, Bat Count, and the Great Backyard Bird Count. Whether through the programs at the Center or at home, visitors to Five Rivers contribute to scientific research on wildlife.

Over the years, efforts have been made to improve wildlife habitat at the site. For Earth Day this year, volunteers—including DEC Commissioner Joe Martens—planted 300 trees to create roosting sites for grassland birds adjacent to a recently acquired 60-acre parcel of fallow field. If all goes as hoped, the site will become more attractive for bobolinks and short-eared owls, among others.

Since its inception, Five Rivers Environmental Education Center has welcomed more than 3 million people, making important contributions to environmental literacy, stewardship, civic pride, and to the physical and emotional well-being of visitors of all ages; not to mention to the conservation of New York's natural and cultural resources.

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