

# Message from the President: Stillwell Woods Preserve

**Stella Miller**

Stillwell Woods Preserve. Mainly known for its wooded mountain biking trails, many people are not aware that its varied habitats play host to over 80 species of birds as well as butterflies, mammals and other wildlife. This under-appreciated preserve also contains approximately 25 acres of grassland/meadow area which for years has been mowed into what amounts to a lawn.

Grasslands have been declining faster than any other habitat type in the United States. The primary cause of these declines is residential and commercial development (these habitats are very easily cleared since they lack trees) and abandonment of agricultural lands, causing habitat loss due to reversion to later successional stages (there are approximately 20 more acres of field in Stillwell that have already begun the process of reverting to successional woodland). Remaining potential habitat is also being lost or severely degraded by intensification of agricultural practices, e.g., conversion to row crops or early and frequent mowing of hayfields.

In Nassau County, many open space areas have been developed, or converted to ball fields and other intensely used recreational areas. The back fields at Stillwell have been mowed for many years in order to accommodate model airplane enthusiasts.

Huntington-Oyster Bay Audubon Society (“HOBAS”) is spearheading an effort to return the back fields of Stillwell into grasslands, which would host an increased number of birds, butterflies and other wildlife. The County’s decision to not mow a portion of the field this spring/summer, after receiving a request from HOBAS, resulted in that section’s return to a grassland state, attracting a greater diversity and abundance of birds and butterflies than the site has experienced in many years, delighting preserve visitors. This area is comprised of native herbaceous plants such as milkweed (an important host plant for the iconic monarch butterfly and over 400 insect species), northeastern aster, daisy fleabane and various goldenrods, as well as non-native grasses and wildflowers. With the exception of invasive species such as mugwort, multiflora rose and small patches of porcelain berry, the area is what is known as a “**functional grassland**” meaning that while the majority of its vegetation is non-native, it provides vital wildlife habitat including abundant food sources and cover.

Encouraged by this positive first step, representatives from HOBAS met with the County Commissioner of Parks, as well as the Superintendent of Parks in August. We presented the County with a proposal for a management plan that would allow a significant majority of the 25 acres to be restored into a grassland/meadow that would benefit wildlife as well as the local community, while allowing reasonable accommodation of the user group utilizing the field.

Prior to preparing the proposal, we consulted with the Nassau County Soil, Water and Conservation District, who wrote up a slate of recommendations for restoration after surveying

the area. In addition, The Sierra Club, The Nature Conservancy, North Shore Land Alliance, and Friends of the Bay all wrote letters of support after their on-site visits. The objective of our proposal is the restoration of the grassland, including an invasive species eradication program, as well as the reseeding and planting of native vegetation in selected areas.

We believe that the expansion of Stillwell's grasslands would attract an even greater diversity and abundance of birds, butterflies, and other wildlife. In addition, the close proximity to several local schools would provide children with a wonderful outdoor classroom for learning about the natural world.

How can you help? Go to our website. There we have provided you with a letter advocating the preservation of the grasslands, addressed to the Commissioner of Parks. Please download it, sign and send in to voice your support. If the County agrees to our proposal for restoration of the grassland, we will reach out to our members and the community for further assistance on this initiative. Volunteers will be needed at all stages of the restoration.

HOBAS believes that restoring this area would transform Stillwell into a wildlife haven, providing birders, hikers, butterfly enthusiasts and other nature lovers with a unique opportunity to explore one of Nassau County's last remaining grasslands. We hope you agree and will support our efforts!