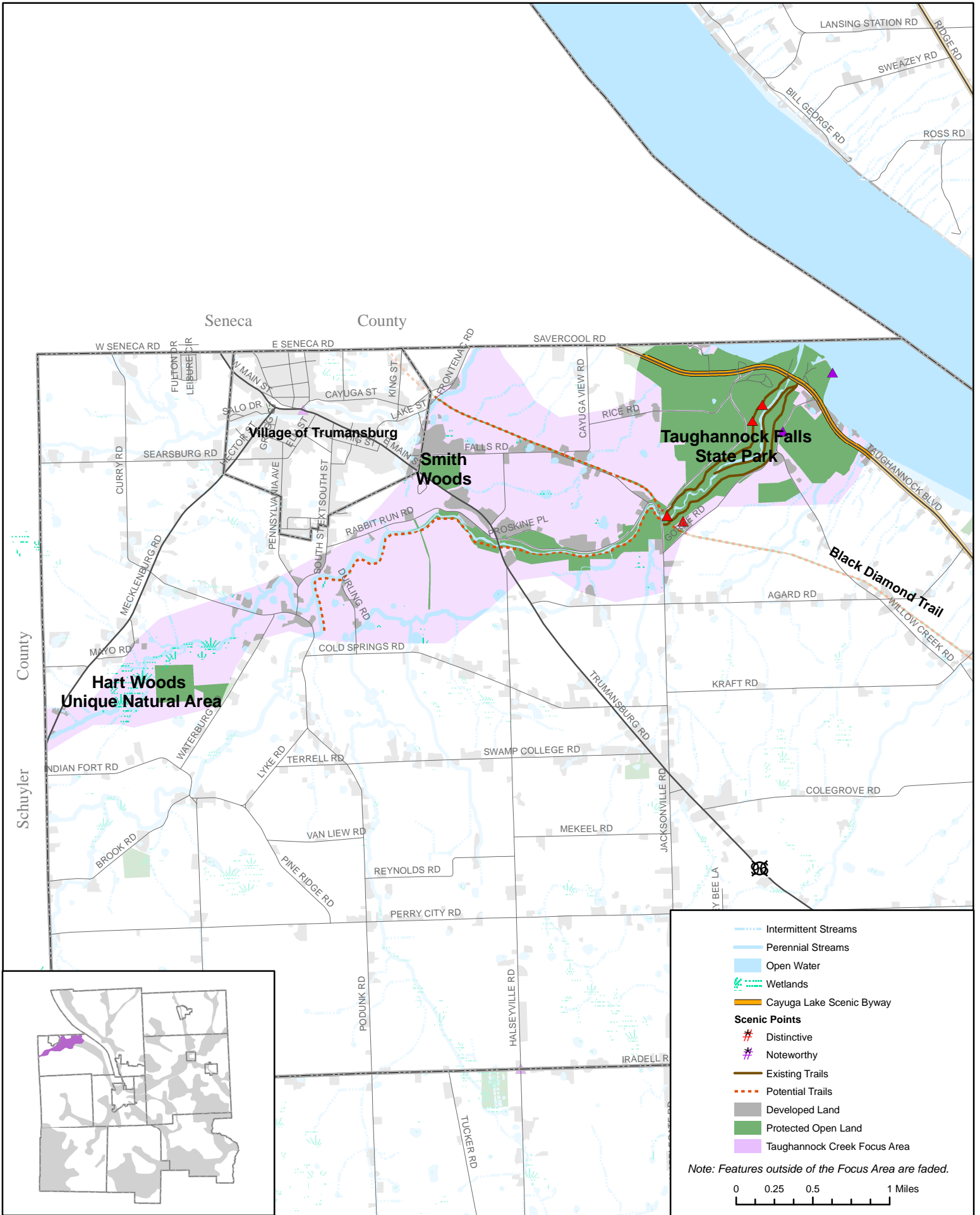


# Taughannock Creek





## Description of Focus Area

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The Taughannock Creek Focus Area is located in the northwest portion of the County in the Town of Ulysses. Taughannock Falls State Park is the defining feature, with the falls, gorge, lakeshore and recreational amenities bringing thousands of visitors to this area every year. The surrounding landscape is largely agricultural grassland, with scattered pockets of forests and wetlands.

## Major Benefits

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Major benefits provided by this Focus Area are outdoor recreation, scenic views, and critical habitat and biodiversity. Recreational opportunities are centered around Taughannock Falls State Park. Spectacular views, both along the creek and at the lakeshore enhance this outdoor experience. Critical habitat areas include the Taughannock Falls gorge area, as well as areas to the west of the gorge; Smith Woods; and a Unique Natural Area in the western portion of the Focus Area, known locally as Hart Woods. Surrounding agricultural grassland also provides important habitat, and enhances biodiversity in this area.

Other important benefits include fishing and water quality. The areas along Taughannock Creek and the outfall of the Creek are noted for their prime fishing. A major wetlands complex in the upstream portion of the Focus Area, protected land downstream, and forested buffers throughout play a critical role in maintaining water quality. Although water quality is generally high in Taughannock Creek, sedimentation is a major concern.

### Outdoor Recreation

Taughannock Falls State Park provides outstanding recreational opportunities for residents of Tompkins County and visitors from throughout the region. The namesake waterfall is noted as one of the outstanding natural attractions in the Northeast. With a drop of more than 200 feet, it is taller than Niagara Falls. The cliffs that tower 400 feet above the gorge contribute to the magnificence of this viewing experience. These falls, the park facilities, and the lakeshore are the focal points of recreation in the Focus Area. Trails in the gorge and along the rim offer spectacular hiking opportunities with scenic views of the falls. Campsites and cabins overlook Cayuga Lake, and a boat launch,

marina, and swimming beach are provided at the lakeshore. Readily available parking, easy-to-access facilities, and manageable grades along paths and trails in the State Park make it one of the most accessible recreational areas for people with physical challenges. In the winter, the park offers cross-country skiing, slopes for sledding and natural skating ponds.



*The swimming beach at Taughannock Falls State Park is just one of the many recreational amenities in this Focus Area.*

The proposed Black Diamond Trail, slated to extend along the west side of the Lake linking Taughannock Falls State Park to the three other State Parks to the south, will also greatly add to the recreational opportunities in this Focus Area. Potential trails could also extend along the creek corridor within the State Park to the west of the existing trails, as well as along the narrow spur of state-owned land located at the far eastern edge of the Park.

### Scenic Views

Taughannock Falls is one of the most scenic features in Tompkins County. In addition, this Focus Area offers beautiful and expansive views across the lake to the wooded hillsides in the Town of Lansing. The Cayuga Lake Scenic Byway runs through the Focus Area and provides views of the Lake as well. Although planning efforts for scenic resources will largely be done as part of the anticipated scenic resources plan that will follow completion of the scenic resources inventory, it is identified here because it is a key benefit provided by this Focus Area. The scenic resources inventory documents several scenic views from within this Focus Area, and numerous others that include portions of this Focus Area within their viewsheds.

## Critical Habitat and Biodiversity

The Taughannock Creek Gorge, with its dramatic rock cliffs, streambed, and adjacent forested slopes, provides habitat for a diverse range of plants and animals, including several rare birds and unique ecological communities<sup>1</sup>. Along the gorge bottom, and on the creek delta near the lake, is a floodplain forest. This portion of the Creek supports diverse bird species and is an important spawning ground, particularly for Atlantic Salmon and Lake Trout. Along the Creek, the north-facing dripping cliffs of the gorge provide a very cool micro-climate that supports ancient arctic-alpine plants that have survived despite considerable changes in their environment. Higher up the



*The north-facing dripping cliffs of the gorge provide a very cool micro-climate that supports ancient arctic-alpine plants.*

gorge, as the slope becomes more gradual, rich-mesic forests thrive.

West of the gorge and just outside of the Village of Trumansburg, Smith Woods, a privately owned preserve, is another rich habitat pocket. This old-growth forest remains one of the best examples of mature forest on a moderately moist, or mesic, site in Central New York. In February of 2006, the Smith Woods Board transferred ownership of the Woods, as well as responsibility to maintain them in a natural state, to the Cayuga Nature Center. Cayuga Nature Center recently put in a nature trail, with information about various species found in the woods. Since it's near the Trumansburg schools, the Woods provide an important educational resource for classes.

Further east, along Bolton Creek (a tributary of Taughannock Creek) is Hart Woods Unique Natural Area, which includes a large wetland complex and remnants of mature forests. This area is made up of several large private parcels, including one parcel with a conservation easement that could provide a foundation for future conservation efforts in this area. Other more fragmented forested areas, as well as several other small wetlands, are scattered throughout the Focus Area. The Taughannock Creek corridor provides an important connecting link between these key habitat areas, and has been identified by the Tompkins County Greenway Coalition as a biological corridor. Much of the remaining landscape provides agricultural grassland habitat, which support important grassland birds and other species.

<sup>1</sup> New York Natural Heritage Program, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, May 2005. Biodiversity Databases, Element Occurrence Record Digital Data Set. Albany, New York.

## Protection and Management Issues

### Outdoor Recreation

- ▢ Scenic views and tranquility are important components of the outdoor experience, and are threatened in some areas by human development and incompatible land uses. The magnificent scenic views from Taughannock Falls State Park, both of the shoreline and hillside across the lake and of the hills and valleys surrounding the Park, are threatened by the increasing development pressure in Lansing and around the Village of Trumansburg.
- ▢ Aquatic invasive species interfere with the ability of boats to move and dock in shallow-water areas.

The presence of Eurasian watermilfoil and, more recently, water chestnuts has been documented in Cayuga Lake and could be a future concern in the Taughannock marina.

### Scenic Views

- ▢ Scenic views contribute to the general attractiveness, outdoor experiences, and high quality of life experienced by residents and tourists of Tompkins County. These views can be degraded when vegetation or manmade structures interfere with the

quality of the view or the point from which the view can be seen. Particularly important scenic views need to be protected, as well as the overall visual quality of the Cayuga Lake Scenic Byway.

### Critical Habitat and Biodiversity

Although specific habitat size requirements vary by habitat type and from species to species, contiguous open space of at least 135 acres is generally needed to support diversity and abundance in plant and animal communities, and to enhance species survival by providing habitat for larger populations of animals and allowing for species movement and migration. The 30-acre Smith Woods is particularly at risk in this regard. It is also surrounded on three sides by roads; one of which (Route 96) is heavily traveled, presenting a danger to wildlife. Increasing development in this area threatens to further isolate this habitat pocket.



*Increasing development around Smith Woods threatens to further isolate this habitat pocket.*

- n Wildlife corridors promote genetic diversity among species and help counter the negative effects of habitat fragmentation by connecting otherwise isolated patches of suitable habitat. The creek corridor in the eastern side of the Focus Area is part of the State Park; however, the Park corridor that extends along the creek is relatively narrow. In addition, development pressure from nearby Trumansburg may lead to further fragmentation of land around the creek corridor to the west, outside of the park. Large parcels adjacent to the creek corridor could be actively managed or acquired to benefit wildlife and water quality along the corridor.
- n The introduction of non-native species, pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizer can inhibit growth of native plants critical to biodiversity. Use of pesticides and herbicides in areas adjacent to key aquatic habitat is particularly problematic, as it can introduce these pollutants into the water and negatively affect habitat for native aquatic species. Introduced sport fish species can also compete against native fish populations and limit the survival rate of immature native fish.
- n There is not enough protected or actively managed grassland habitat in the County. Patches of at least 150 acres in size (or smaller patches located in close proximity) are necessary to support viable grassland species. Several grassland species are threatened in the County and require specific land management practices to provide high-quality habitat. State Parks has taken the initiative to manage non-recreational grassland in Taughannock State Park for grassland bird habitat. Other more extensive grasslands in the Focus Area could be particularly viable for grassland habitat if management practices were tailored for this goal.
- n Some timber harvesting practices can adversely impact forest habitat for particular species (for example, by reducing canopy coverage and forest litter, damaging understory vegetation, and increasing erosion on steep hillsides and along creeks). Timber harvesting practices should include considerations for plant and animal species and water quality.
- n Illegal collection of seeds, plants, and animals can have a negative impact on plant and animal populations that are critical to biodiversity in this region.
- n Overgrazing of forested areas by whitetail deer can inhibit native plant growth, forest diversity, and forest regeneration. Given that there are limited hunting opportunities in this Focus Area, deer overgrazing is a particular concern.
- n Species that live in and around stream corridors, floodplains, and wetlands require clean water to thrive. Poorly managed riparian areas, and riparian areas that are cleared for development, negatively impact water quality and reduce the viability of these habitat areas.
- n Species found at the waters edge or near frequently used trails may be sensitive to disturbance by high-intensity uses and by people going off-trail.

- Wetlands and ponds are sometimes filled or degraded, which has a negative impact on the ability of those systems to support wetland and pond species. Large wetlands (>5 acres) provide critical habitat, and smaller wetlands serve as “stepping stones” to provide habitat connections. Wetlands and pond areas that are isolated and small in size cannot support certain wetland and pond species of greatest conservation need. Many wetland bird communities depend on their local habitat, as well as the wetlands within a two-mile radius. The large wetland complex in Hart Woods provides key wetland habitat.
- When streambanks, lakeshores, and upland areas erode and become bare, water quality and the health of aquatic species are compromised (by increases in sediment and other pollutants that don’t get filtered out by vegetation, and higher water temperatures resulting from lack of shade from trees and other tall vegetation). Although specific buffer needs vary from site to site based on topography, vegetation, soils, and land uses, in general a 100-foot vegetated buffer is the minimum needed to provide the filtration necessary for nutrient and pollutant removal and to prevent excessive temperature fluctuations. A wider buffer width may be required for bank stabilization, improved habitat conditions, or additional water filtration, depending

on local site characteristics. Most of Taughannock Creek outside of the main park area does not have adequate buffers. Of particular concern are sections along Taughannock Park Road, Rabbit Run Road and Poduck Road.



*Most of Taughannock Creek outside of the main park area does not have adequate forested buffers.*

- Atlantic Salmon are sometimes harvested at a greater rate than their ability to reproduce. Taughannock Creek, an important spawning ground for Atlantic Salmon, is also a popular fishing destination.

## Priority Actions for Taughannock Creek

The Natural Features Focus Area Project has identified 35 priority action items to be initiated over the next five years. The action items have been established to bolster and coordinate the region’s many existing conservation efforts. They are not intended to replace or replicate those efforts. The action items reflect the broad range of unique uses in the identified Focus Areas. Below is a list of actions that are particularly relevant to Taughannock Creek Focus Area. For a complete list of actions and designation of principal agencies that will lead implementation efforts please see the *Implementation of Priority Actions* section of the complete county-wide plan.

### Water Quality

- Encourage semi-pervious paving, bioretention, and infiltration practices.
- Provide education about and access to hydrologically sensitive area data through the Natural Resources Inventory (NRI) on-line interactive mapping tool.
- Educate highway departments about the impacts of roadside ditching on water quality and water quantity as well as on the spread of invasive species, and provide highway departments with information about appropriate best management practices to address this issue.
- Investigate and distribute information about techniques for controlling excessive water-borne bacteria originating from geese and other wildlife.
- Initiate inspection and maintenance requirements for individual on-site wastewater treatment systems, as also recommended in the Tompkins County Comprehensive Plan.

## Outdoor Recreation

- è Provide emergency responders with better trail maps to improve incident response time. Create and distribute a guidebook for the county's recreational amenities that highlights trails, swimming areas, and bird watching opportunities.
- è Reduce nighttime light and noise impacts on Butter-milk Falls by working with business owners on Route 13. This should be part of a longer-term strategy to establish local controls adjacent to all State Parks including Taughannock State Park.
- è Establish launch facilities for canoes, kayaks, and other 'muscle-powered' boats along Cayuga Lake.

## Critical Habitat and Biodiversity

- è Work with municipalities to protect wetlands and vernal pools smaller than 12.4 acres in size and not regulated by the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation.
- è Map small wetlands and vernal pools using data on hydrologically sensitive areas.

## Invasive Species and Native Plants

- è Inventory and identify high priority areas for the control of invasive species.
- è Establish a coordinated approach for distributing invasive species information to landowners throughout identified high priority areas.
- è Develop and distribute a list of popular landscaping plants and appropriate native species substitutions.
- è Conduct a comprehensive "natural lawns and gardens" campaign to limit the use of pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizer, and increase the use of native plants in landscaping.
- è Provide a wide selection of native plants as part of annual plant sale, and eliminate all invasive species from the sale.

## Rural Landowner Outreach and Education

- è Enhance existing rural landowner education efforts with an emphasis on sustainable forestry practices, impacts of ATV use, invasive species, wetlands management, grassland habitat, and targeted outreach to new rural landowners.
- è Identify and coordinate the dissemination of information about grants available to private landowners for habitat management and enhance-ment.

## Technical Assistance for Municipalities

- è Provide technical assistance to municipalities working on projects that implement the recom-mendations of the plan.
- è Provide training and information to municipalities on the full-range of conservation tools available, the Plan and the Natural Resources Inventory, flood plain management strategies, and vernal pool and small wetland habitat conservation.

## Coordination

- è Convene a group of partners (Tompkins County Conservation Partners) involved in local conserva-tion efforts twice a year. Meetings will facilitate regular information sharing as well as coordinated educational efforts such as periodic field trips for municipal officials to key sites in the Focus Areas.

## Land Protection in Priority Areas

- è Protect priority protection areas through partner-ships with area agencies and municipalities by purchasing land and acquiring conservation easements.
- è Educate landowners about tax incentives available for conservation efforts through various formats including town/village newsletters with special emphasis on landowners within the open space system.
- è Develop or identify a model conservation zoning ordinance for use in key portions of the Focus Areas.
- è Engage key land protection stakeholders to assess the financial resources available for land conser-vation and work to establish additional funding as needed.