



# Long Island Botanical Society

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The Quarterly Newsletter

Winter 2017

## Pine Barrens Death-camas on Long Island, New York

By Dave Taft

Though I have occasionally set out with the intention of finding a rare plant, more often than not, the discovery would be best described as a “welcome and unexpected variation on a theme.” You could hardly describe any plant walk as a random event. Just ask any serious naturalist—whether he or she is primarily a bird watcher, a plant fan, mammal tracker, whatever their discipline—and you’ll be told that success is based on the correct alignment of timing, information, and circumstance, no matter how



Figure 1. Close up of death-camas inflorescence. [Photo by D. Taft.]

accidental it may all seem. After all, fact is, you had to rouse yourself from relative comfort to find yourself in a woodland, a bog, a shoreline, armed with enough experience or information, and at roughly the correct time to make “luck” happen.

This is true of sites that are unfamiliar, but strangely, it is even more true of familiar sites. It is tempting to discount a discovery in an area that has been botanized for years; hard to overcome the voice in the back of your head insisting that “everything that could be known here already is;” harder still to maintain optimism—even when faced with the unusual—that the plant before you might in fact be something previously unrecorded.

It was by no means my intention to find pine barrens death-camas (*Stenanthium leimanthoides*, previously named *Zigadenus leimanthoides*), let alone reestablish its presence in the flora of New York State. Rather, I was out to observe other rare but more familiar plants—specifically some of the native orchids and carnivorous species that can be found in the wilds of Connetquot River State Park and Preserve near Oakdale, New York.

For those who know it, Connetquot is a rich hunting ground sprawling across almost 3500 acres and including a wide variety of unusual habitats. These acres were kept off the market by a private fishing club during Long Island’s rush to suburbanize. The park is now an island within “The Island,” a treasure of plants and animals. The land was purchased by New York State for the benefit and enjoyment of the general public. The park has been botanized often; it is hardly unknown.

On July 24, 2016 I had decided to invite a family friend, Carl Vitevitch, Jr., a new student of natural sciences at SUNY Oneonta, to experience some of the wilder side of his native Long Island. Carl assured me he did not have to return to flipping burgers at Jake’s Wayback (his summertime vocation) until late that evening. So it seemed like the perfect opportunity to check on what the already well-established Long Island drought had done to some of my favorite wetlands.

Carl and I had been out for about two hours and had covered a good deal of ground when we arrived at one of the sites where *Platanthera cristata* (crested yellow orchid) is an occasional find. We were able to locate two of the small orchids growing side by side in full flower, beneath a few skunk cabbage leaves. This was a relief, as we had not found any other examples of this species in leaf or flower that day. As I admired the elaborate, gorgeously colored blossoms, I happened to look deeper into the woods and noted a light greenish-white inflorescence standing about two feet tall. Making my way to

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## Long Island Botanical Society

Founded: 1986 • Incorporated: 1989

The Long Island Botanical Society is dedicated to the promotion of field botany and a greater understanding of the plants that grow wild on Long Island, New York.

Visit the Society's Web site  
[www.libotanical.org](http://www.libotanical.org)

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## Society News

Sue Avery has agreed to serve as LIBS Recording Secretary, replacing Barbara Conolly for the remainder of her term.

Save the date for the first LIBS field trip of 2017: April 22, 2017 (Saturday) 10:00 AM, Van Cortlandt Park Wildflowers, Bronx, NY, Trip Leader: Kristine Wallstrom. Details will be published in the Spring newsletter.

To further document the LIBS 30th Anniversary Trip to the Sierra Nevada Mountains, Jim Goltz's detailed memoir, a 43-page manuscript—including 23 full-color plates—has been published as a pdf on the LIBS website. Additionally, the LIBS' Members Night program featured slideshows of the trip. Thanks to Michael Madigan, these may be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/198523059> (Password: LIBS2016).

The oak tree disease, oak wilt, has been detected in the towns of Babylon, Islip, Riverhead, and Southold in Suffolk County. See the NYS DEC press release at this link: <http://tinyurl.com/gtgkeau>

The Long Island Regional Seed Consortium will host its Annual Seed Swap on Saturday, February 11 from 12-4pm at Suffolk County Community College, Riverhead Campus. More information at <http://www.lirsc.org/>

A forum on the southern pine beetle is planned for March 8-9, 2017 at Brookhaven National Laboratory. For more information, contact [csholl@pb.state.ny.us](mailto:csholl@pb.state.ny.us)

The Long Island Natural History Conference is scheduled for March 24-25, 2017 at Brookhaven National Laboratory. More information is available here: <http://longislandnature.org/>

## LIBS Honors Two Members with Distinguished Service Award

Barbara Conolly and Carol Johnston were each honored by LIBS with the Distinguished Service Award at members night on December 13, 2016 at the Bill Paterson Nature Center, Muttontown Preserve, East Norwich. The event was videotaped by Michael Madigan. It can be viewed at this link: <https://vimeo.com/198521353> (password: LIBS2016), beginning around minute 17.

Excerpts of members' comments, reflections and tributes are printed below.

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As president of LIBS for the past 25 years, I know that the spirit and strength of the society lies in its members who share a passionate dedication to LIBS. Members serve because they enjoy it and know they are contributing to a greater cause, the advancement of botany on Long Island.

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One such contribution has been the 30 years of recording field trips and member meetings by **Barbara Conolly**, LIBS Recording Secretary. She has recorded observations and reports of everything from rare plants and invasive species to jokes made by members during monthly meetings. For the past 30 years the first order of business at meetings has been the reading of the minutes of the previous meeting by Barbara Conolly. There is something comforting about sitting quietly for a few minutes listening to Barbara read. Sometimes we would laugh about a comment that was recorded. This tradition has gone on month after month and is among my fondest memories of LIBS.

Another passionate member for 30 years is LIBS Treasurer, **Carol Johnston**, who has worked quietly behind the scenes keeping finances, tax obligations and other matters in order. Single handed she tackled the IRS and got LIBS its 501(c)3 non-profit status. Carol radiates her passion for ferns and wildflowers and her love of being outdoors. I'll never forget taking her picture on a 12,000 foot mountain summit in the Sierra Nevada, California and botanizing with her on LIBS trips to Newfoundland, Florida, and the Great Smoky Mountains. —Eric Lamont

Thanks and congratulations to Carol Johnston for her decades of service as LIBS Treasurer and Board Member. She also did so much behind-the-scenes admin work for our successful 2016 trip to California and did a lot of work with the insurances for LIBS.

Barbara Conolly has been a stalwart with her detailed general meeting and board meeting minutes for all of these years. Barbara's great photo albums were a wonderful way to enjoy so many LIBS field trips over and over again. —Rich Kelly

### **Ancient Ferns, Ancient Friends**

Walking in ancient forests of ferns and cycads dwarfs the existence of all we are, specks in a vegetative world where fronds and bracts morph one into the other.

Similarly, meeting Carol and Barbara upon entering the botanical world of Long Island all those decades ago—not ancient, but almost—was a happening, weaving primordial threads of knowledge which penetrate deep into the darkened and illuminated world of plant knowledge. All the hours Carol gave at the Planting Fields Herbarium and Barbara gave in the field—dedicated, ever-present, and constant—makes them both heroes stretching back for the millennia in one individual's life of what is real and important.

Thank you for being role models and inspiration.  
—Karen Blumer

It has been great fun to be in the field with them. I have learned about endurance and strength of will from them and will treasure my association with them forever. —Andy Greller

I recall a LIBS or NYFA trip to the Chaumont Barrens in upstate New York (Jefferson County) in 1995. It is a beautiful place and we had a long day before the weather began to turn cold and damp. Carol, Barbara, Betty Lotowycz (aka "The Ladies") and I decided to make tracks for the cars. Collapsing into Carol's Volvo wagon, we were much cheered by the appearance of a lovely bottle of port plus glasses to warm us both inside and out. Cheers (!) Ladies. And thanks for great companionship and your work for LIBS. —Jane Blanchard

There are many who have bestowed the Long Island Botanical Society with expertise, and congeniality, and humor. There are many who have helped bolster the cause of the society. And there are some whose mere presence lends prestige to the society. But, during my tenure as Editor and Corresponding Secretary, and now as life member, I can think of no other fine botanists that lend all of this along with such grace and finesse in the field and the lecture room more than Barbara and Carol. —John Potente

### **A Poem for Barbara and Carol**

On the north shore  
There live two women  
You couldn't ask for more  
Of all they have given

Both delightful and fun  
They always share their space  
But you must run  
To keep with their poise and grace

For all they do  
We have not a clue  
But we who know them  
Amid flowers and stem  
Are blessed for ever  
For these women are so clever!

—MaryLaura Lamont

My tribute to Barbara was a recollection of first meeting her. I was just out of college in my first job with The Nature Conservancy at Uplands Farm. Barbara was leading a series of workshops—for teachers and field trip assistants, as I recall. I found an old journal entry from then, my note read "I went  
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(Awards continued from page 3)



Barbara Conolly (left) and Carol Johnston (right) were each honored by LIBS with the Distinguished Service Award at members night on December 13, 2016. [Photo by E. Lamont.]

on a nature walk the way it should be given—by Mrs. Barbara Conolly. She was GOOD. Wish I knew that much, but I guess I'm learning." I was especially impressed by her hiking boots—golden-tan leather lace-up, rubber soles, waterproof as Barbara trekked impervious through the elements. A couple of years later after hearing me extol their virtues, Allan surprised me with a Christmas present—Boots just like Barbara's!

And in the Herbarium at Planting Fields, Carol was the one who taught Al and me the proper way to prepare a plant specimen, as part of Otto Heck's Natural History summer course. —Lois Lindberg



Dear Eric, and all members of LIBS—

I was so touched and honored by the Distinguished Service award last night! LIBS is dear to my heart, and as a small organization we've done great things: with our Newsletter, our Anniversary trips, and our emerging Flora Atlas. I'm glad to be able to serve you as Treasurer!

With my warmest thanks,  
Carol

### A note from our October 2016 speaker:

Dear LIBS,

Thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to present about the American chestnut. I was so inspired by all the questions and interest in this tree! Seatuck is working on building our American chestnut program and would love your help. If you are interested in working with us in our efforts identifying trees on Long Island please email us at [chestnut@seatuck.org](mailto:chestnut@seatuck.org).

Thank you,  
Jessica Enzmann  
Seatuck Environmental Association

(Pine Barrens continued from cover)

the plant, in an area that remained damp but would have been considerably wetter in a normal year, I noted two other similar flower spikes nearby. The leaves of these plants were grass-like and pleated longitudinally: in cross section they would best be described as an "M." However, the flowers were like nothing I'd seen before, and were certainly not grass flowers. With a perianth about a quarter inch wide, each flower had six tepals and was held in orderly fashion away from a grooved rachis (Fig. 1). The youngest flowers at the growing tip of the inflorescence were almost white; older flowers were a pale apple green.

I had called Carl over and we bent over the Newcomb's Wildflower Field Guide (1977) I'd brought. Though far from a perfect identification, bunchflower (*Melanthium virginicum*) was the best match I could find. The description of the plant's habitat was accurate enough, and its peculiar flowering habit seemed fairly well described.

At the end of the day, ruminating about this peculiar plant find, I decided to send a note to Steve Young (Chief Botanist, New York Natural Heritage Program) and a few other botanist friends from LIBS and elsewhere, thinking that both the sighting of this plant and the poor year for *Platanthera* were worth recording in the LIBS newsletter or other botanical records. I reasoned that perhaps someone would be more familiar with the plant, since I was not completely satisfied with my identification. I included a few photos, and concluded the note with the line "Is this a relatively common plant on Long Island that I've missed all these years?..."

By July 29<sup>th</sup> a dozen emails from Andy Greller and Steve Young followed and went from congratulating me on the relatively rare find of *Melanthium* in flower, to increasing certainty that the  
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Figure 2. Eric Lamont, Steve Young and the author (l to r), in Connetquot River State Park. [Photo via D. Taft.]

## The Great Gull Island Work Day

By MaryLaura Lamont

On September 17, 2016, 12 members of the Long Island Botanical Society boarded a lobster boat at Orient Point and set off for Great Gull Island. The island is to the northeast of Plum Island off eastern Long Island's North Fork and is owned by the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH). The island has the remains of old Fort Michie, established in 1886 as part of the coastal defense network.

Our goal was to remove plants growing in tern nesting areas. The island is becoming overgrown with vegetation and most terns cannot nest in highly vegetated areas. They need open spots to raise their precious families. On Great Gull Island, the highly endangered roseate tern (*Sterna dougallii*) and the threatened common tern (*Sterna hirundo*) both nest, and together they form one of the largest tern nesting colonies in the United States. The Museum earlier in the year had asked for help so what better way than to offer our assistance as a group effort? We hoped this would prove to be a very worthwhile task—helping the Museum remove plants which are taking over nesting spots which in “turn” benefits the declining tern species.

The day dawned bright and sunny with an artistically cloud-dotted sky. The cooler temperature and low humidity made for an ideal outdoors trip. We learned upon arriving on the island that although there are other invasives present, we would be cutting out and digging up only one plant species: the nasty invasive plant called black swallowwort (*Cynanchum louiseae*).

It actually was difficult and sometimes back-breaking work but we did what we could in several areas of the small 17-acre island. About 20 huge black garbage bags of swallowwort were removed and all by their roots within approximately six hours. We worked hard and we hope our efforts were worth it.

It was a delight and honor to meet the legendary and iconic woman in charge of the Great Gull Island tern nesting project, the AMNH's Helen Hays. She has been with this project for over 50 years now. She has given her whole life to the study of terns and is a world expert on them.

While we were laboriously digging, we were being observed by eight large gray seals (*Halichoerus grypus*) quite close to where we were, and this turned out to be an added highlight of the day. The seals were curious, watching us constantly. It was a treat to watch them as well, and we could hear them snorting and blowing air and diving at times. I have no doubt they could hear us grunting and groaning trying to get at the roots of the swallowwort!

It was also interesting historically to walk through the World Wars I and II tunnels, bunkers and giant gun embankments. Some of us were assigned to work within a tremendous 100-year-old bunker that had at one time housed one of the largest guns of its kind, a 16” coastal defense cannon that could be raised, if ever needed, and lowered to hide it. None of us had ever seen anything like this gun emplacement. It was built during World

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(Pine Barrens continued from page 4)

plant in question could actually be the SX (state extirpated) *Zigadenus leimanthoides* (now *Stenanthium*), a plant that was last seen in New York in 1929 about 10 miles from the site. If confirmed, this would be the northernmost documented occurrence of the plant. No wonder it isn't listed in Newcomb's, and thank heavens for Steve Young's encyclopedic mind. Steve concluded his final email to me with the succinct: “This would be a great discovery!”

And so, about two weeks later, Steve Young, Eric Lamont, and I (Fig. 2) found ourselves standing in the middle of the very same wetland examining a plant that seemed increasingly likely to be the first *Stenanthium leimanthoides* seen in New York State in almost a century. Staring at its elegant flower spikes on that hot summer day, we all felt confident that the plant had probably been growing quietly in this obscure location through the decades, only to come to light by happy “accident.”

Although the four original inflorescences seem to be the only flowers in 2016, counts of what we considered sterile plants on that second visit revealed more plants throughout this single wetland. All told, we found four flowering plants, two old stalks from 2015, and about 250 separate clumps of leaves in nine separate groups. The identity of these very grass-like leaves was later confirmed by Steve at his lab. The plants had successfully reproduced in 2015, as evidenced by remains of seed capsules on one of the old seed stalks. It will be interesting to learn whether this rare beauty grows elsewhere in this exceptional Long Island park.

It always pays to take a hike...and sometimes it pays richly.

[Ed. note: See also Young, S. (compiler). 2017. New endangered and threatened plant records for New York State 2016. NYFA Quart. Newsl. Winter 2017: 12-14.]

(Great Gull Island continued from page 5)



Figure 1. Some volunteers, from left to right: John Heidecker, Sue Avery, Louise Harrison, Gigi Spates (back to camera), Lillian Ball, Eric Lamont. This was taken from within the giant gun emplacement area on the extreme eastern end of the island. Note the size of the swallowwort plants! [Photo by ML. Lamont.]

Figure 2. Our workers in the field. View facing west towards Plum Island. [Photo by ML. Lamont.]



Figure 3. *Xanthoria parietina* (beach lichen or shore lichen). [Photo by A. Greller.]

War I, and, as the story goes, when it was test-fired, it broke the windows of homes on the eastern end of Long Island!

The island is largely vegetated with native plants such as seaside goldenrod (*Solidago sempervirens*), beach grass (*Ammophila breviligulata*), a variety of asters including the beautiful heath aster (*Symphotrichum ericoides*), beach wormwood (*Artemisia campestris* ssp. *caudata*) and bayberry (*Morella caroliniensis*). The rare and beautiful native lichen, *Xanthoria parietina*, locally known as the shore or beach lichen, was also photographed and documented growing on rocks (Fig. 3). There are other invasive plants besides the miserable swallowwort, such as Asiatic bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*).

You could not have asked for a better work day outdoors on an island in the sea, but on the return boat ride home, we all had to admit we were tired. The Museum people expressed their sincere thanks for helping out and we have already been asked by Helen Hays to come back next year! Our aching backs should be well enough by then to give it a go again!

# The Biggest Tree of Heaven ...Is Still A Champion!

By MaryLaura Lamont

The biggest tree of heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*) in New York State lives on the old and beautiful Sherrewogue Estate in Head of the Harbor! On a sultry summer day late last July, several LIBS members (Margaret Conover and her friend Frannie Pistell, Sue Avery, David Laby and MaryLaura Lamont) went to measure the tree. They were hosted by the owner of the property who wanted to know if it still was the New York State champion.



Figure 1. Sue Avery and Dave Laby measure the circumference of the large ailanthus tree on the Sherrewogue Estate in Head of the Harbor, Long Island, NY. [Photo by ML. Lamont.]

The tree is quite impressive, even though it lost one of its limbs. It is a wonderful sight to behold because of its immense size (Fig. 1). In 1952, when it was first measured, its circumference was 18'8". By 1962 it had reached 19'5" and in 1972 19'8". By 1990, this big tree was measured at 20'6" circumference, a height of 60', a crown spread of 80' by 70', with a total point award of 325! In each of those years this big "heavenly tree" was declared by the American Forestry Association to be the National Champion!

According to our measurements, the tree now stands at 21'9" circumference (about 7' in diameter) and approximately 83' in height and 60' in crown spread to yield a total score of a whopping 359 points! The current National Champion, located in Ohio, has only 321 points. In 2010, New York State awarded the State Ailanthus Championship to a specimen in Livingston County, New York, with only 231

points, making the Head of the Harbor tree still the State as well as the National Champion.

Ailanthus trees are native to East Asia, are either male or female, and their flowers are rather stinky. There are glands on the leaves containing oils that also smell unpleasant. Our Head of the Harbor tree appears to be a male since we observed no fruits,

and the owner states there are no little ailanthus growing nearby. Ailanthus trees are very adaptable and are able to grow in poor conditions.

Ailanthus was first introduced in the US in Pennsylvania in 1784 and into New York as an ornamental in 1820. Since then it has spread invasively throughout the country. Regardless, we are still honored to have such a stinky, invasive tree as State and National Champion, even if not everyone agrees.

[Ed. Note: The author relied upon several sources including the National Register of Big Trees, updated 2013; an article in the Times-Beacon Newspaper, Oct. 18, 1990; and "The Trees of Long Island" by George Peters, 1973, Publication #3 of the Long Island Horticultural Society, Planting Fields Arboretum, Oyster Bay, N.Y. An article on the Head of the Harbor Tree appeared in the October 24, 1970 issue of the New Yorker.]

## JOIN LIBS TODAY!

Annual Membership  
is \$20 payable to:  
Long Island Botanical Society

Mail your dues to:

**Carol Johnston, LIBS Treasurer**  
**347 Duck Pond Road**  
**Locust Valley, NY 11560**

NOTE: Membership renewals are due in January

## UPCOMING PROGRAMS

**January and February: No meeting!**

**March 14, 2017\*                      Tuesday, 7:30 PM**

**Dave Taft: "With a Little Help from My Friends: Parasites, Carnivores, Saprophytes and Heterotrophs Among Us."** Plants are far more than just pretty green things. In fact, some are downright Machiavellian, opportunistic, or just plain strange. Learn about the wily means through which certain resourceful plants obtain energy as you enjoy this survey of the "only-sometimes-green" world of heterotrophic local plants. Dave Taft is currently the coordinator of the Jamaica Bay Unit of Gateway National Recreation Area in Brooklyn and Queens (...the other Long Island!). Though a self-described orchid addict, he can often be observed skulking through local woodlands searching for unfortunate natural subjects to photograph, write about, or draw.

Location: Bill Paterson Nature Center,  
Muttontown Preserve, East Norwich

**April 11, 2017\***

**Tuesday, 7:30 PM**

**Steve Young: "The Rare Plants of Plum Island, New York."** The New York Natural Heritage Program inventoried the rare plants, animals, and ecological communities on Plum Island in 2015. Chief botanist Steve Young will present the results of the field surveys for rare plants and discuss future survey and management recommendations. Steve received his B.S. in Environmental and Resource Management from the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry and his M.S. in Taxonomic Botany from the University of Florida. He is in his 27th year as chief botanist for the New York Natural Heritage Program, a program of the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse that is based in Albany.

Location: Bill Paterson Nature Center,  
Muttontown Preserve, East Norwich

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\* Refreshments and informal talk begin at 7:30 p.m. Formal meeting starts at 8:00 p.m. Directions to Muttontown or Stony Brook: 516-354-6506