

Eye on the Clyde: A Wild River Explained

We all sat patiently listening, the dark water flowing quietly, almost imperceptibly beneath the rippled reflection of a blue but cloud-broken sky. A low horizon of yellow-green sedge spread out behind us and a patch of bulrush stems waved slightly in the breeze before us, but I and the thirteen other paddlers had our attention set on Eric Sorenson, a tall, lean man with brown hair graying at the temples and a salt-and-pepper mustache.

“Whenever I’m in the field I like to sort of zoom out before looking very closely at a specific area,” he said. “We’re right at the fringe of things changing dramatically, from the boreal spruce-fir forest dominant in Canada to the central hardwoods to the south. [These communities] are boreal remnants more common in Quebec and farther north.”

Sorenson literally wrote the book on natural communities in Vermont. After earning his Master’s in Wetland Ecology, Sorenson went on to positions throughout New England working to restore wetlands. At the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation he was responsible for developing the 1993 Vermont Wetlands Conservation Strategy; during his eleven years with the Nature Conservancy of Vermont, he co-authored (with Elizabeth Thompson) *Wetland, Woodland, Wildland: A Guide to the Natural Communities of Vermont*. He is now the Natural Communities Ecologist at the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department’s Nongame and Natural Heritage Program, and is, without risk of exaggeration, among the most important individual conservationists in the state.

So, understandably, we were more than happy to float idly on the shallow waters of the Clyde’s Buck Flats as he shared his perspective.

“Then you zoom in a little, to peatlands [which range from bogs to fens]. Sorenson then pointed behind us, to the outstretched shoreline of tall, waving sedge that rose out of the water. “That’s hairy-fruited sedge,” he said. “The most characteristic species of intermediate fens.”

A fen, he explained, is a peatland that receives mineral-rich groundwater, enabling many species to flourish. An intermediate fen falls between a very acidic, nutrient-poor fen and a less acid, calcium-rich fen. “Even if it’s not highly rich in magnesium and calcium, it’s there,” Sorenson said.

As we paddled the river for the next few hours before lunch, Sorenson took every opportunity to answer questions and stop to examine changes in the flora, explaining differences as they appeared. And they appeared frequently. “At [the] Natural Heritage [Program] we look mostly for exceptional examples [of communities]. If you were going to go along here and map communities it would be a real task because there are so many small patch[es]. I think that’s one of the things that makes this place so special.”

We headed back downstream for lunch at the launch after visiting a beaver pond upstream, and on the way we stopped for a walk on the large peat mat of sedge pointed out earlier. Once on the mat, above the horizon of grass visible from the canoe, the fen stretches outward in a wide expanse, a few hummocks of alders here and there, but otherwise flat and green to the shore of red maple leaves in the distance.

“Fens typically occur in one-acre to half-acre communities,” Sorenson said. “This one is fifty acres. The largest in the state.”

The fifty-acre fen sits in the middle of Buck Flats, part of a 1,100-acre stretch of wetlands beginning near Island Pond. All told, Sorenson says, “The Clyde River wetlands complex includes over 2,300 acres of marsh, fen, and swamp and comprises one of Vermont’s most significant wetland areas.”

As the paddle continued downstream toward Charleston, the conversation turned frequently to conservation practices—methods discussed ranged from the Current Use program, recently revised to enroll ecologically-sensitive areas like those of the Clyde, to conservation easements and state regulation. Dan Kilborn, of the Vermont Land Trust, which works to purchase conservation easements on priority lands, was among the group of paddlers and explained that easements offer the benefit of “security so that you know what will happen to the property after you’re no longer the owner.” The state can change its mind, budgets may shrink; but an easement exists in perpetuity.

But not everyone has enough land to qualify for easements, and in a wetland that harbors two state-endangered plant species and many other rare and uncommon species, protection is a must. The state recognized that need in 1986 when it created a framework for protecting Vermont’s wetlands, and a classification and protection system was set up under that framework in the early nineties. But many significant wetlands—it is estimated around 30-percent—are not protected at all, in fact are not even mapped. Others, like the Clyde, meet requirements for more protection than they are currently given, but due to difficulties in the evolving system have not yet received it.

“My perspective is that the full range of conservation and protection tools are needed for places like the Clyde River wetlands—[Current Use], conservation easements, fee acquisition, regulations.² And education. “I bet most landowners will do the right thing if they understand the significance of these wetlands, without any financial incentive.”

After eight hours on the river a few of us followed the schedule and pulled out at the Twin Bridges road in East Charleston. But Sorenson and the rest kept going, eager to see what was around the next bend.