Beyond Easements: Winnakee Builds a New Model for Active Land Management in the Hudson Valley

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By Claire Greenburger

Winnakee CEO Bob Davis, a forester by training, is steering the trust toward hands-on management (photo by Claire Greenburger).

On a Saturday morning in August, 15 volunteers gathered in the tall grasses of a recently acquired 140-acre Winnakee Land Trust preserve in the Town of Clermont. Working inside a one-acre deer enclosure, a fenced plot designed to protect saplings from hungry animals, the volunteers removed buckthorn, a stubborn invasive that had spread thickly through the understory. Every invasive they pulled opened space for young native trees.

The effort reflects a new mission for Winnakee: restoring land it acquires in ways the conservancy hopes can serve as a model for the Hudson Valley, at a time when much of the region's privately held land is poised to change hands.

"These [deer fences] are active experiments," said Jeff Scales, the former owner who donated the Clermont property to Winnakee last December. "We're going to learn what works, and what doesn't work, with the ultimate goal of applying this to a lot of other places."

In recent years, Winnakee has focused on forest health—restoring resilient, age-diverse forests that can continue to sequester carbon (photo by Claire Greenburger).

Since its founding in 1989, Winnakee Land Trust—like many land trusts across the Hudson Valley—has relied on conservation easements to protect farmland and forests to help preserve the region's rural character. Easements are legal agreements by which property owners voluntarily forgo development to ensure their land remains open and forever undeveloped, even if ownership changes. In these agreements, Winnakee doesn't own the property itself; instead, it holds the legal rights that prevent development.

"Easements are a good first step [in conservation]," said Bob Davis, Winnakee's chief executive officer. But they don't guarantee the land is actively cared for, he explained. In recent years, seeing the climate warm and invasive species spread, Winnakee has responded by stepping up efforts to buy land outright.

Left to right, Leola Specht, Jen Adams, Jeff Scales, Uri Perrin, and Bob Davis at the Clermont preserve, where the former landowners and Winnakee staff steward the land together (photo by Claire Greenburger).

“We want to own the properties because we want to manage them,” said Uri Perrin, Winnakee’s senior director of external affairs. “We want to be able to actively go in and deal with the invasive problems and the overbrowsing deer and help to restore native species and wetland riparian barriers.”

New leadership and expertise spurred this change in approach. When Davis, a forester by training, became Winnakee’s CEO in 2019, the trust owned just two sites—Burger Hill in Rhinebeck and Winnakee Nature Preserve in Hyde Park, totalling 180 acres. Today, it owns more than 1,700 acres, and the organization expects to add an additional 642 acres by year’s end.

Davis, with the backing of Winnakee’s board of directors, has reoriented the trust to focus on ecosystem and forest health. In 2023, Jen Adams, a certified arborist with a background in ecology, joined to oversee land management. That same year, David Newman, a professor at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, joined the board. In 2024, Winnakee hired Trevor Keough, a forester and resource analyst, to work with landowners and guide acquisitions. Most recently, in 2025, the trust brought on Todd Waldron, with 25 years of forestland management experience, to lead its conservation and stewardship.

At Vlei Marsh, a Winnakee preserve, wetlands provide critical animal habitat (photo by Claire Greenburger).

Winnakee now fields a level of forestry expertise not typically seen in the land-trust world, Davis said. It's an eight-person, intergenerational team that, together, has given Winnakee a distinctly ecological focus. Rather than thinking of land primarily in terms of scenic viewsheds or open space, they approach each parcel as a living system that requires hands-on care.

Aging Land Owners Face a Choice

Winnakee's move toward land acquisition and stewardship is motivated in part by a recognition that land ownership in the Hudson Valley is on the cusp of a significant shift. Much of the region's most ecologically valuable land is privately held by aging landowners, many of whom do not have heirs, Perrin said. In the next two decades, roughly 400,000 acres are expected to change hands every year across the state, according to Davis. The trust sees this as both a threat—land could be vulnerable to fragmentation or development—and an opportunity to secure and restore some of the region's most critical landscapes.

Jen Adams, Winnakee's senior conservation biologist and director of parks and ecological preserves, walks the trails at Vlei Marsh (photo by Claire Greenburger).

Land in the Hudson Valley, however, is expensive and sales move fast, which makes putting that strategy into practice a challenge. A core piece of Winnakee's mission is educating landowners about the ecological value—and options—for their land so they will consider donating or stewarding it themselves. One of the newest acquisitions, the Clermont preserve, illustrates the approach: owners Scales and Leola Specht embraced the donation as a way to protect their property and advance restoration.

Clermont residents Scales and Specht first saw that the property was for sale while biking along Woods Road in 2022. They were immediately drawn to its diversity—the thousands of feet of streams, wetlands, and sweeping stretches of forest and meadow—and of the preservation potential since it was undeveloped.

Leola Specht inspects the deer enclosure at Clermont to keep saplings safe from browsing (photo by Claire Greenburger).

The two had grown concerned about the loss of biodiversity across the Hudson Valley and were eager to do what they could to make a difference. On a quarter-acre lot on Livingston Street in the Village of Rhinebeck that the couple owns—now home to Winnakee's headquarters—they had expanded an existing pollinator garden filled with native wildflowers and shrubs. In Clermont, they saw an opportunity to perform restoration work on a much larger scale. They purchased the land for $359,000 that same year.

Although the property was already protected by a Scenic Hudson conservation easement that prohibited development on all but three acres, Scales and Specht began to think about its long-term care. They concluded that Winnakee had the expertise and resources to care for it in perpetuity. "We felt it could get stewarded even more than we could handle," Scales said. In 2024, they donated the land to the trust, which now provides staff and volunteer support for its restoration.

Piles of cut buckthorn show the invasive volunteers tackled to open space for natives (photo by Claire Greenburger).

For the couple, the decision was ultimately about legacy—leaving the world a better place than they found it. They considered that the transfer might mean a loss of assets for Scales' children, but they arrived at a broader, less conventional view of inheritance. "We always think—are we leaving enough for Jeff's kids? But also, are we leaving the Earth better for them and for future generations?" Specht said.

Winnakee hopes other landowners will follow the same path they did. In its workshops with property owners, the trust explains not only the potential for ecological impact from locking in permanent protection but also how an outright gift to a land trust can carry meaningful financial and tax benefits. In some cases, Davis noted, landowners reviewing their finances realize they might actually end up with more money after donating their property.

Specht uses a plant ID app in the field to track what's returning inside the deer exclosures (photo by Claire Greenburger).

More than half of the roughly 1,700 acres Winnakee now owns, including Clermont, have come as gifts. A patchwork of state grants, private foundations, and local donors fund the rest of Winnakee's acquisitions. The trust's purchasing strategy focuses on stitching together connected corridors of protected land rather than scattered parcels in isolation. Clermont, for instance, sits within a 1,600-acre block of public and conserved lands. That creates a continuous habitat for wildlife, alongside other ecosystem benefits, Perrin explained.

Seeds for the Future

At the deer enclosures on Winnakee's property in Clermont, with the buckthorn gone, signs of recovery are visible. Native nannyberry shrubs are sprouting. Young oaks and ash trees are taking root. Specht hopes the invasive management will be self-sustaining. "Buckthorn needs sun," she explained. "As these trees get taller, they'll shade it out."

A small gap in the deer fence patched with twigs and twine (photo by Claire Greenburger).

Last fall, with help from a state Regenerate NY Forestry Cost Share Grant, Scales and Specht built four deer enclosures on the property. They collaborated with a professional forester to select areas heavily degraded by invasives but also close to healthy native trees, so new seedlings could spread naturally with the help of birds and wind. Using cedar poles cut from dead trees on the site, salvaged wire bought secondhand on Facebook Marketplace, and other materials, they cobbled together sturdy deer fences, each about 7 feet tall. One plot sits in full sun, another beside wetlands, and the remaining two within denser forest. Now that Winnakee owns the property, it provides staff and volunteers to help with management and invasive removal.

A young oak sapling rises inside the enclosure, finally able to outgrow the deer (photo by Claire Greenburger).

The aim is regeneration. Much of New York's forestland today is middle-aged, while young forests and shrublands—critical habitat for birds and other wildlife—have dwindled. The enclosures are meant to give these sections of forest space and time for young trees to grow.

Specht, a retired human resources and wellness professional, has thrown herself into land stewardship, finding her spirit renewed by the work. On a gray September morning, she walked the edge of a deer enclosure with Scales, checking for gaps in the fencing and pausing to point out invasives or identify plants using an app on her phone. Spotting a baby oak rising nearly two feet behind the fencing, her eyes lit with excitement. "They are now getting a chance," she said.

A young ash sapling takes root inside the protected plot (photo by Claire Greenburger).

Scales, now retired from a career in wealth management, followed a few paces behind. He is quieter and more reserved, but has equal conviction about the value of native plant restoration and forest regeneration. To him, caring for the land in one's own backyard can ripple outward into real ecological change. "We think people have such an opportunity with what they do with their land. You can regenerate forests right at home," Specht said.

The DEC will regularly inspect the site to track regeneration, counting freshly sprouted trees to see if the enclosures are allowing young growth the space to thrive. They also verify that the project is meeting state grant requirements, which call for suppressing at least 80% of competing non-native invasive vegetation by the end of the grant's first three years. The fencing is expected to stay up for about a decade—long enough for saplings to rise above the browse line and spare them from the deer.

Native nannyberry shrubs sprout within the fenced area, early evidence of regeneration (photo by Claire Greenburger).

“This is a lot of work, and it’s going to take years and years to have a significant impact here,” Davis said. Still, he and others at Winnakee stress that the site is valuable not only in its own right but also as a model. “This can serve as a demonstration for other folks who want to take the next step and start actively managing their properties.”

Looking ahead, Winnakee hopes to expand its use of deer enclosures to other sites, though scaling the approach presents challenges. Traditional fencing is costly, both to install and maintain, and grant funding is limited. Staff are exploring cheaper alternatives, such as thinner wire and electric fencing, to protect larger areas without exhausting resources. Volunteers will remain central to that work, both for providing physical labor and for spreading stewardship beyond Winnakee’s preserves.

Former owners Scales and Specht live along Woods Road in Clermont, just down from the property they donated, where they remain active stewards of the land (photo by Claire Greenburger).

Climate adaptation looms large in these plans. As temperatures rise, the region's forests are expected to shift: oaks and other southern species will likely thrive, while maples may fade from the landscape. "One hundred years from now, you'll stand here and look across the river, and it's not going to be bright vibrant reds and yellows," Davis said on an early fall day, the leaves just beginning to turn. Staff are already discussing "assisted transition," intentionally planting species with ranges further south to help forests adjust. In the meantime, they stress that keeping existing forests healthy and able to sequester carbon remains essential in the fight against climate change.

"These are the issues everyone's going to be grappling with," Davis said.