

## Volunteer of the Year: Jack Gleason

NH Audubon is fortunate to have many stellar volunteers, including sanctuary stewards. Anybody who has worked alongside of Jack Gleason, however, knows that Jack goes far beyond what most volunteers are capable of. He carries an arsenal of tools, both literally and figuratively. The most impressive of these are his determination and dedication to the place he loves, Ponemah Bog.

As Jack describes, he was 'chosen' shortly after his retirement to be a Bog 'Friend' by his former neighbor and Friends of Ponemah Bog President, Pauline Therault. Under the guidance of Pauline, and his direct predecessor, John Dustin, Jack took a strong interest in learning about the Bog and helping out where needed in true 'Friends' fashion. It was in this capacity that I got to know Jack. His interests spilled over from Ponemah, and he soon joined me on a field trip to another Audubon sanctuary, Smith Pond Bog (which, Jack discovered is NOT a true bog like Ponemah). To think that false advertising first led us to meet might have been an ominous sign...but Jack was bound to stick around at Ponemah Bog. Over the next few years, I witnessed Jack's growing interests in and eventual knowledge of all things Bog, and when former Friends of Ponemah Bog President, John Dustin, moved away, Jack was the clear choice to lead the Friends and was appointed to head the group.

As a Master Gardener, Jack's botanical interests were a perfect fit for a place like Ponemah Bog, and he became deeply interested in all forms of bog life – picking up skills in bird identification, odonates, and a more refined knowledge of plants – which seem to fascinate him the most: the sundews, pitcher plants, grasses, bog rosemary, bog cotton, and of course, the orchids. He took it upon himself to create interpretive displays and kiosk materials, including a poster of flowering bog plants with photos he took on a kiosk that he was instrumental in installing.

Managing the Bog includes much physical work that Jack handles with ease: continuously repairing and replacing wooden boards, benches, and platforms along the nearly one-mile long boardwalk system, brushing back overgrown vegetation that blocks the trails, monitoring and cleaning several nesting boxes around the trail system annually, replacing signs and maintaining kiosks.

Jack is also a remarkable teacher. With a growing knowledge of flora and fauna, Jack began leading bog walks during the spring and summer months, fulfilling the role of an enthusiastic mentor to countless stewards, Audubon members, anyone who shows an interest in the Bog.

Since Jack's retirement about ten years ago, he has not had much time for 'taking it easy' – and he seems quite satisfied with that arrangement. As a Master Gardener and Big Tree Steward, an active member of the Amherst Conservation Commission, and the President of Friends of Ponemah Bog, it is not surprising that he doesn't sit still much.

Still, somehow, Jack pretty much single-handedly managed the Bog in 2010, whose Friends group had lost several members to do a number of unrelated factors. But in 2011, he had built the volunteer corps back up to a promising handful of enthusiastic learners, workers, and teachers. Jack is a leader....and he is not without charm. Somehow, he has recruited 'eight wonderful women' to the Friends group (as he often puts it when referring to these volunteers).

His organizational skills make him an excellent leader, and his work ethic inspires others to join him. More than a couple of times, I have seen Jack rope in the casual hiker to helping out at the Bog. Through his leadership and determination, Jack truly leads by example.

I have also seen a have seen his determination border on obsessive at times, and Jack will tell you that his wife is resigned to the belief that the Bog is going to be the end of him. From what I've seen of his interest in the Bog, I'm guessing he wouldn't have it any other way.

A quick story about Jack's determination:

Late last month – amidst what may become Jack's crowning achievement at Ponemah Bog – NH Audubon and the Friends group, led by Jack, undertook a major project to raise the bog boardwalk a full four inches over most of its length. Recent years have left the current mile-long footpath underwater far too often. Jack recognized this problem, and through a calculated approach, took measurements to address it. He ordered and paid for all the materials (which included over \$3,000 of rough cut hemlock boards), and organized other volunteers and laborers – including those from the county prison – to complete the work.

Anyway, it was a late September day, the first of several consecutive work days that we organized, and he was pushing a wheelbarrow full of planks along the boardwalk when its wheel became caught on the bog mat between two sections – and directly over an invisible yellow-jacket's nest. As I tried to dislodge the wheel, we suddenly noticed the fierce pests, and Jack took the full brunt of their attack all over his face and head! At first, it had appeared Jack would resume working right away, but he thought it best to head towards his Benadryl back home just in case. Not 20 minutes later he returned not only loaded up with Benadryl, but also donning his full beekeeper's suit to complete the remainder of the work around the nest! Needless to say, he did this alone. Later that night...when the bees were sleeping, Jack returned in his bee suit to enact revenge, and once again made the Bog a safer place for volunteers and visitors. It is a rarity that a volunteer steward goes to such measures to finish a task, but this was routine for him. He takes creative problem solving to the next level. So, as we can see, Jack is also a superhero.

Thanks in no small part to Jack, Ponemah Bog has become one of NHA's most popular and most vibrant outdoor classrooms. Schools, camps, wildflower groups, and people from all around come to experience this natural treasure. It is said that gardeners make things beautiful for others, and Jack's efforts have made Ponemah Bog a more beautiful place for all visitors.

This spring, after Jack co-led with me a Bog walk that had 20 participants, I received a glowing email from a participant who had raved about Jack's knowledge, his ability to share it, and his enthusiasm for volunteering. The following is an excerpt from that email:

*"Jack was also extremely knowledgeable and very enthusiastic about the bog and its inhabitants...he seems personally involved."*

From what I know of Jack, it is clear that he IS personally involved, as much as one can be in any place – and this stems from his deep love of the Bog, which comes from a positive connection to this place.

I also know that Jack doesn't work for recognition or reward. His work is a labor of love, and he continuously strives to improve conditions for other users and spread his knowledge of the outdoors, inspiring others to do the same. He truly deserves credit for his tireless, and often uphill, work fulfilling NHA's mission. What Jack has been able to accomplish through his volunteer role at Ponemah Bog has far exceeded the reach of any individual and helps NHA extend its own reach tremendously. We can't do it without you, Jack. On behalf of all of NHA, I can't thank you enough for your huge contributions. Congratulations.