

2021 John Thalheimer Volunteer Award

As presented by Phil Brown for the New Hampshire Audubon Annual Meeting, September 18, 2021.

The John Thalheimer Volunteer Award has been presented annually since 1997. This award is dedicated to the first recipient, John Thalheimer, whose outstanding service to NH Audubon exemplified volunteer commitment, strengthened the organization, and provided an inspiring example for others.

The 2021 recipient of the John Thalheimer Volunteer Award is George Rollend.

I met George during a NH Coverts volunteer training program in May of 2019 in which I was instructing a group about wildlife habitat management. I look back on this birdy morning at the Deering Wildlife Sanctuary and recall an image of George, binoculars around his neck and coffee mug in hand. His enthusiasm for being out in nature and stewarding the natural world was evident as he inquired about stewardship possibilities with NH Audubon.

After the passing of Jack Gleason, long-term steward of the Ponemah Bog Wildlife Sanctuary in Amherst, this sanctuary needed a leader, and volunteer Bill Coder capably stepped into this role as the interim steward. It was Bill who quickly recognized George's potential as a new volunteer. They worked together for several months before Bill turned over the reins to George as sanctuary steward – a lifetime appointment, as my volunteers know. There was no doubt from the start that George was a great fit!

George has a lifelong connection with bogs from his childhood in Springfield, MA. His mother, a bird lover, was an ardent defender against development and helped protect their local bog. Perhaps by fate, George returned to a bog as a volunteer after his retirement and has followed in her footsteps.

His dedication to the Bog and all the people who interact with it has been exceptional. His communication skills and ability to engage with all visitors to the bog is unparalleled. His physical abilities to carry heavy boards and replace broken planks, construct new platforms, and install nest boxes in trees leave little to be desired for bog maintenance work. But perhaps his greatest accomplishments are those in which he has collaborated with other volunteers. In two years, George has greatly expanded the network of "Bog Friends" through personal recruitment and has done much to cultivate and steward new and existing volunteers.

All who work alongside George have positive things to say about his personable nature and great sense of humor. His organization and business skills make him a natural task master, a trait he shares with Jack. Months into his volunteering, it became clear George was truly following in Jack's footsteps when he experienced the customary attack by ground-nesting yellow jackets while trimming back vegetation!



George Rollend, recipient of the 2021 John Thalheimer Volunteer Award.

Photo by Rebecca Suomala.

Under George’s leadership, the Bog has been transformed into a true gem of the sanctuaries system and is now among the most visited and treasured of these locations. A partial list of his many accomplishments over the past two years include the following:

- Leading the installation of the “edu-center” kiosk, “the Cadillac of kiosks,” a model for an all-volunteer project and one which saved NH Audubon thousands of dollars
- Creating a new trail guide and interpretive materials, much of which reside on the kiosk
- Replacement/repair of structures including the Tamarack platform, which is now dedicated to the Friends of Ponemah Bog
- Cultivating donors, in-kind volunteer contributions, and a new foundation source
- Facilitating a connection with the Amherst Garden Club in training volunteer docents to lead bog field trips
- Working with students who are developing projects related to bog plants and wildlife
- Constant stewardship and endless replacement of bog bridges
- Installation and monitoring of nest boxes
- Performing chloride monitoring and advocating for salt reduction on area roads
- Promoting a COVID-safe atmosphere at Ponemah Bog by enforcing the trail a one-way loop
- Organizing outings for the Friends of Ponemah Bog

Finally, but certainly not the least of these, George was instrumental in the development of the Ponemah Bog virtual tour, pouring hours of administrative work into this fabulous final product. Now an even more diverse audience can experience Ponemah Bog, something George is very proud of.

On behalf of all of us at NH Audubon and all those who enjoy Ponemah Bog, I am proud to present George with the John Thalheimer Volunteer Award.

