

The ECOLOGICAL GIFTS PROGRAM

DIANE AND ALAN ALDRED

Alan and Diane Aldred in their Ghost Hill Farm house in 1997

Photo: © Alan Aldred

An Ancestral Land and its Natural Pastures Preserved in Perpetuity



Photo: © Benoit Jobin, Canadian Wildlife Service

The magnificent natural pastures of the property donated by the Aldreds

When Elizabeth Lusk Hay was a child, she saw something that “looked like a huge, golden moon wafting its way around the corner of the hill” where she lived. Then it just vanished. The beautiful will-o’-the-wisp might have resulted from the spontaneous combustion of marsh gases, or from one of the numerous phantoms said to live on Ghost Hill Farm, a piece of land located in Pontiac, near Gatineau. The 440-acre property (178 hectares) was settled and inhabited by five generations of Lusks, all descendants of Joseph Lusk and Esther Balmer, who immigrated to the region from Ireland around 1820. The first three generations struggled hard to clear the forest so as to grow crops, hay, livestock and orchard fruits. They probably never imagined their descendants would one day give their land back to nature, but

Diane Aldred, Mrs. Lusk Hay’s daughter, did just that. In fact, she gave it to nature rather than leaving it to development pressures closing in from the cities of Gatineau and Ottawa and to changing agricultural practices that would degrade its old pastures.

Mrs. Aldred, a high school teacher and a writer-historian, grew up on the family farm. Young Diane’s huge playground comprised wetlands, natural pastures, maturing hardwood forests, dense cedar groves, a 36-m steep limestone shale cliff, and the Breckenridge Creek and its estuary on the Ottawa River. Her heart was with this land and her parents knew it. In 1993, they bequeathed her their half of the farmland, the other half being owned by her aunt. Mrs. Aldred and her husband, Alan, then moved into the limestone house built in 1880 by one of her ancestors atop the haunted hill, which offers a beautiful view of the Ottawa River. Since the 1930s, the grasslands had been used only as summer pastures and the couple carried on the tradition by renting it to neighbouring farmers, who grazed their cattle there. Mr. Aldred, a forest management consultant, managed the property’s woodlots and shared his wife’s passion

for the place. They loved the whole property and enjoyed the shoreline by the river, the big, wonderful maples, ashes, and elms, flooded each spring in the creek estuary that reminded them of the Everglades, and the beaver pond, against the cliff, teeming with ducks and numerous water birds.



Photo: © Raymond Belhumeur

In the early spring, the Western Chorus Frog’s distinctive call can be heard. Barely 3 cm long, this tiny amphibian breeds in temporary and shallow ponds, precarious sites that can easily be destroyed by land drainage and levelling.

Soon after moving in, the Aldreds started to think about the future of this ancestral land, whose ecological value, they felt, probably equalled its historical value. The property’s varied features provide habitats for a great diversity of animals and plants, some of which, like the Western Chorus Frog and the Wild Leek, are vulnerable in Quebec and its creek estuary

shelters some of the rare Cork Elm and Black Maple forest stands in Quebec. In 1997, motivated by friends who had donated a piece of land that became part of a provincial park in British Columbia, Mrs. Aldred contacted Environment Canada's Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) to find out if their property was worthy of protection. The CWS then contacted the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) in Quebec, who conducted several biological surveys on the property over the next few years to document its diversity and richness. In 2001, NCC acquired Mrs. Aldred's aunt's undivided half interest of the land and a few months later the Aldreds started to work on a donation agreement for their part. They both felt that to be connected to nature was very important for human beings and wanted the farmland to be permanently protected as a nature preserve. In the course of the donation process, they learned, among other things, that their pastures dotted with hawthorns offer a suitable environment for the Eastern Loggerhead Shrike, an endangered bird in Canada. The population of this species has greatly decreased during the past decades and an experimental reintroduction program has recently started in the hope of helping its recovery.

Diane Aldred unexpectedly passed away in 2003, before

her precious legacy to future generations was completed. But the year after, according to her wish, her husband made the ecological donation of the ancestral land to the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC)¹ and to the Province of Quebec Society for the Protection of Birds (PQSPB)², two private non-profit organizations dedicated to nature protection. The donation was made according to Environment Canada's Ecological Gifts Program, which provides a tax break and a reduction in the taxable capital gain for gifts of ecologically sensitive land or partial interests in land. "For us, the tax benefits were not so important, since we had no gain in capital to pay, but this program is a wonderful thing, because it encourages people to make a donation," Mr. Aldred explains.



Photo: © Alan Aldred

Diane Aldred

Diane Aldred's favourite thing was to walk the homestead. She was especially concerned with the fate of its natural pastures and the myriad of animals that live or hunt there, be they a Western Chorus Frog, an Eastern Meadowlark, a Bobolink or a

Red-tailed Hawk. "I could not live with the knowledge of the wholesale destruction that would follow in the wake of a bulldozer," she once wrote. Thanks to the unfailing support of her husband Alan, her dream to protect Ghost Hill Farm's beautiful landscapes, varied habitats and numerous wild species was accomplished. Her ancestors can rest in peace, since the pastures left by their many decades of backbreaking work will be preserved as well as the ghost-creating marshes.



Photo: © Samuel Belleau

With its contrasting plumage, aerial displays and inimitable song, the male Bobolink, a common field species, does not only attract the attention of the females it is courting.

For more information on ecological gifts, please contact:

The Ecological Gifts Program
 Canadian Wildlife Service
 Environment Canada
 Quebec Region
 1141 Route de l'Église, P.O. Box 10100
 Sainte-Foy, Quebec
 G1V 4H5

Tel.: 1-800-463-4311

E-mail: quebec.scf@ec.gc.ca

¹ www.natureconservancy.ca

² www.pqspb.org

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