

## Another Great Year for the MFO/COVERTS Program

by Gary R. Goff, MFO/COVERTS Program Director

A significant milestone was reached in the summer of '98 (our last reporting year), when a Master Forest Owner\* (MFO) volunteer completed the 1,000<sup>th</sup> documented visit to a forest owner since the start of the program in 1991. With an average of 62 acres per visited owner, that means over 62,000 forested acres have benefited from the program! The true total may easily be double that though, as only about a third of the volunteers return report forms annually. These numbers reflect an incredible effort on the part of a dedicated corps of some 240 volunteers who have been certified through the program over the years. As of this year, there are 137 active volunteers from 45 NYS counties.

The mission of the MFO/COVERTS Program is to provide private, non-industrial forest owners of NYS with the information and encouragement necessary to manage their forest holdings wisely. The top three reasons (in order) forest owners give for owning their holdings are: 1) recreation, 2) wildlife, and 3) privacy. The volunteers help forest owners based on their years of experience owning and managing forest land and the information learned at the 4-day training workshop hosted annually at Cornell University's Arnot Forest. Typically, volunteers arrange a half-day visit with a neighbor, friend, relative or referral at their woodlot. Volunteers are not professional foresters so their advice is limited to encouragement on setting realistic management objectives and suggestions on where to find more information or needed services. MFO volunteers often report back that forest owners truly appreciate knowing where to start the management process. The many issues involved in forest ownership can appear rather daunting to new and inexperienced owners!

Volunteers also work within their communities on hundred's of forestry-related educational activities and events. In 1998, 51 volunteers reported 351 activities that reached an estimated audience of 32,890! Many of these "contacts" are based on readership of various newsletters and magazines, but thousands of people are more directly contacted via woodswalks, 4-H clubs, school presentations, and educational workshops hosted by Cooperative Extension, NYS DEC and NYFOA in counties throughout the state. An example of a great effort coordinated on the part of Al Brown and other volunteers in Chautauqua County is the annual "Forest Stewardship" supplement printed by The Jamestown "Post-Journal". This year's edition contained 9 articles and activities written mostly by volunteers from western NY. Yet another good example of outreach activities by volunteers is when 4 MFOs gave testimony at the USDA Private Land Conservation Forum held in Syracuse this fall.

### **Refresher workshops**

Three regional (Eastern, Western, and Northern) workshops are held annually to bring certified volunteers together for a day-long refresher training. We typically have a few speakers on current, local issues in the morning and then go to a field site in the afternoon. This year a total of about 70 volunteers attended the three workshops. MFO Jack McShane hosted the Eastern workshop in Delaware County. We received an update on activities and programs for forest owners as part of the NY City Watershed Program administered by the Watershed Agriculture Council (WAC) in the morning and then toured Jack's beautiful home and woods. If you know Jack, wildlife is his primary objective and he has accomplished dozens of habitat improvement projects including: ponds, food plots, apple tree plantings, old field reclamation, nest boxes, stand thinnings, and use of tree tubes.

The Northern refresher was hosted by Lewis Staats, Sr. Extension Associate, at Cornell's Uihlein Sugar Maple Research and Extension Field Station in Lake Placid. In the morning we heard from two local maple producers who were severely impacted by the '98 ice storm. In the afternoon we toured Lew's greenhouse and plantation where he is working on selection and propagation of genetically 'sweet trees'. Special thanks are due Peter Smallidge who acquired funding from the USDA Ice Storm Recovery Project to cover the costs of the Northern refresher. Pete also gave presentation at each of the workshops.

The Western refresher was hosted by MFO Rick White at the newly established 'Pfeiffer Nature Center' in Portville. The morning program covered the topics of hardwood regeneration and old growth. In the afternoon we toured the Nature Center where Rick is the Exec. Director. The site is both beautiful and unique with a historic American Chestnut cabin and old-growth stands of hemlock/white pine and red oak. Rick is very interested in establishing a demonstration forest in a portion of the Center's second-growth mixed hardwood stand.

## **New in '99**

We tried a couple new things for the '99 program year. A chronic suggestion by attendees of the new volunteer trainings, is to lengthen the program's duration. This year we added a day to the overall program, but added very new material. The results were very favorable with the largest class ever (38 volunteers) making the commitment and nearly universal agreement that the program was not overly rushed. Upon completion of the training, the volunteers rated their ability to accomplish the goals of the MFO program 4.3 on a 5-point scale. The 2000 workshop will be held at the Arnot Forest, Weds. evening 13 Sept. to noon on Sun. the 17<sup>th</sup>.

Another effort made this year was to conduct two 'focus group' meetings in northern NY with the goal of identifying what could be done to generate greater participation and activity in the program. There are only 10 volunteers in the 9 northern counties; 4 counties have no volunteers. Programs such as MFO/COVERTS build best on their successes. It is difficult to build many success stories with such a thinly stretched corps of volunteers. There will be a concerted effort to recruit more volunteers through interaction with all organizations and agencies to solicit new volunteers. Referrals from such organizations are important sources of forest owner 'clients' and from which to receive new candidate names. Provided there is enough interest, Peter and I will organize a new volunteer training in the Adirondacks in the fall of 2000. If the focus group approach works well in the Adirondacks, we will likely use it elsewhere in regions where the program could use some bolstering!

## **How to arrange for a visit**

A free, no-obligation, on-site visit is yours for the asking! MFO volunteers are within easy driving distance of all citizens of NYS. Call or write a volunteer near you. Listings of volunteers and a program flyer are available at all NYS DEC regional offices, Cornell Cooperative Extension County Assoc. offices, or through a phone call to the NYFOA information line at 1-800-836-3566.

## **How to become a MFO volunteer**

For more information on the program or to request an application form, contact MFO/COVERTS Program Director, Gary Goff, at Fernow Hall, Cornell Univ., Ithaca, NY 14853, ph. 607/255-2824, or e-mail at [grg3@cornell.edu](mailto:grg3@cornell.edu).

COVERTS – (pronounce like cover) meaning good ruffed grouse habitat, refers to a similar program funded by the Ruffed Grouse Society, and is symbolic of the importance of habitat to all wildlife.

Funding for the NY MFO/COVERTS Program comes from the NYS Forest Stewardship Program administered by NYS DEC, The Ruffed Grouse Society, The New York/Tri State Chapter of Safari Club International, The Wentdorf Foundation, NY Woodland Stewards, Inc., and the Renewable Resources Extension Program with cooperation from NYS DEC Div. of Lands and Forests and the NY Forest Owners Association.

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\*The term "Master" Forest Owner implies teacher or instructor as in "school master". The training received by the volunteers complements their experiences as forest owners.