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## Area's natural treasure hides in plain sight

Rensselaer Plateau is an ecological oasis in need of conservation plan to protect, promote, advocates say

By **BRIAN NEARING**  
Staff writer

NASSAU — When David Fleming walks along a hemlock-lined creek and rocky waterfalls in the forest next to his home, he's in his own little piece of the Adirondacks.

"With the evergreens, it even smells like the Adirondacks," he said.

But the Nassau town supervisor lives many miles distant, and has for

his entire life. This is the Rensselaer Plateau — a 105,000-acre high-country swath in eastern Rensselaer County that is the state's fifth-largest remaining intact forest.

A small cadre of residents, including a computer software engineer, a hospice nurse and an ecologist who adopted a low-tech, self-supporting lifestyle, are pushing to create a conservation plan that both protects and promotes the plateau as a ecological

oasis closest to the Capital Region.

Bounded roughly by Route 7 in the north and Route 43 in the south, the land is rugged and rocky, and rich in wildlife. When the occasional moose wanders down into Troy, it comes from the plateau, where rare northern wetlands provide its habitat and altitudes can top 1,800 feet.

In years past, many residents earned a living by rural pursuits, like timbering, farming, maple sugaring, and quarrying. A lot of farmland there has been slowly filling in since

Please see **PLATEAU A6** ►



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**JIM BONESTEEL** leads an alliance that supports a protected wildlife corridor within the Rensselaer Plateau.



# PLATEAU: Seeking a balanced use

▼ CONTINUED FROM A1

the late 1800s, as better farmland opened up with the nation's westward expansion.

Running like a spine down the plateau from the north are the Tibbets State Forest in Hoosick, Pittstown State Forest in Pittstown, Grafton Lakes State Park and its popular beach, the county-owned Dyken Pond Center, the little-known Capital District Wildlife Management Area and the Cherry Plain State Park in Berlin.

Springing from the forest are headwaters of seven rivers that feed the Hudson, as well supplying the Tomhannock Reservoir, the water supply for Troy and several other communities in the county.

"The biggest natural treasure of the entire region is hiding in plain sight," said James Bonesteel, the soft-spoken computer software engineer who lives with his family in a 200-year-old farmhouse along a forested dead-end road in Stephentown. "We are only about 30 minutes by car from Albany, and development is slowly creeping out here."

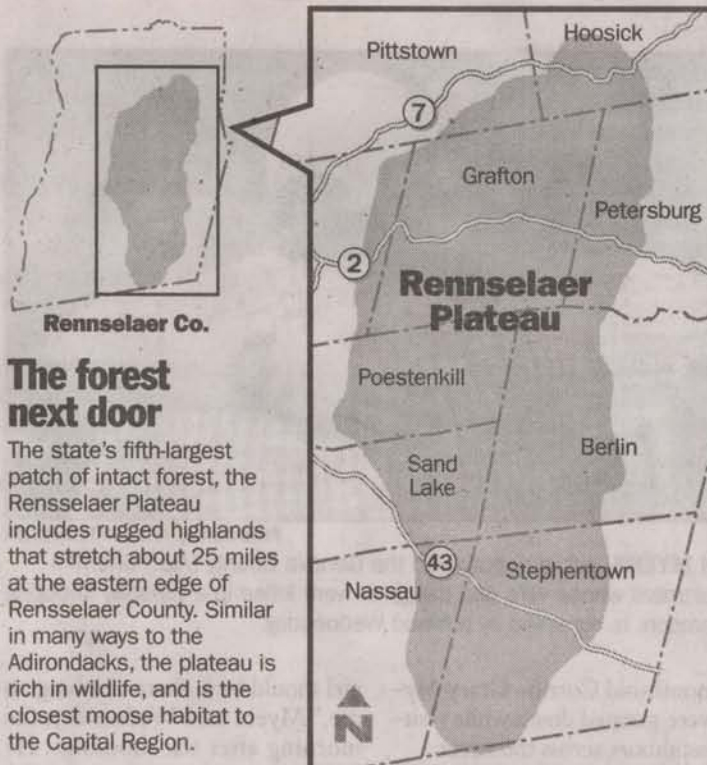
Bonesteel is the president of the Rensselaer Plateau Alliance, a not-for-profit group formed two years ago that has been working toward a conservation plan to create protected corridors that link the most environmentally valuable parts of the plateau.

"Our goal is that people would understand and value the plateau for its forests, which provide clean water, clean air, wildlife habitats and recreational and economic opportunities. We hope to see a patchwork of protected land, working forest and good private stewardship, all of which will help invigorate the local economy and support the local tax base."

County and towns officials are receptive to the idea. "We are seeing a significant increase in the larger developments coming to Nassau," said Fleming. "We had building permits for 72 houses last year, and for us, that is a lot."

With just 5,000 residents within its 48 square miles, the town recently updated its comprehensive plan and zoning to guide where it wants to grow, Fleming said. Along with town boards in Grafton, Poestenkill and Sand Lake, Nassau voted to support the alliance efforts.

"If you are not careful, you can



## The forest next door

The state's fifth-largest patch of intact forest, the Rensselaer Plateau includes rugged highlands that stretch about 25 miles at the eastern edge of Rensselaer County. Similar in many ways to the Adirondacks, the plateau is rich in wildlife, and is the closest moose habitat to the Capital Region.



JOHN CARL D'ANNIBALE/TIMES UNION

**JIM BONESTEEL**, president of the new Rensselaer Plateau Alliance, snowshoes a trail behind his Stephentown home with dogs "Sadie" and "Lucy."

wind up exploiting what you have to the point that no one wants to be there anymore. We want to be something different, and find a balance to serve the residents of our community for generations to come. We want to provide the road map now before it is too late."

Rensselaer County Executive Kathy Jimino said, "We do have this great asset, with so many forms of recreation there already. But is not just recreation. The water for the Tomhannock comes from there, and that is a huge asset.

The alliance is part of the county's larger vision for the area."

The state Hudson River Estuary Program is considering a \$60,000 grant for the alliance to support creation of a conservation plan, said Karen Strong, a biodiversity outreach coordinator for the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

In 2006, the state recognized the plateau as a significant ecological area, she said. "It is such a large block of forest, unfragmented and healthy. The state's other major forests, the Adirondacks, the Catskills, the Shawangunks and the Hudson Highlands, all already have conservation plans."

Part of the credit for the plateau's health comes from a history of responsible forestry practiced there, said Francine Egbert, another alliance member and a hospice nurse who lives near Taberton Mountain in Sand Lake.

However, the major timber company on the plateau, W.J. Cowee in Berlin, which operated for more than a century and held about 17,500 acres, sold out in January to North Carolina-based Heartwood Forestland, a real estate investment trust. Several calls to Heartwood for comment were not returned.

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FRIDAY, MARCH 13, 2009

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