

Logging slated for Zoar Valley splits environmentalists

Mackenzie Shuman

Making their way through a forested area within the Zoar Valley Multiple Use Area, above the famously steep and fragile gorge walls, a group of conservationists look warily upon bright orange paint marking nearly every maple, cherry and walnut tree in sight.

The paint isn't hard to spot among the light browns of the tree bark and green leaves reaching for the May sunshine.



John Buckley, a member of Friends of Zoar Valley, stands near trees blazed with paint to mark them for logging. "At a time when climate change is threatening our existence, we need these big trees to survive," he said.

Libby March, Buffalo News

Each paint slash marks a tree to be cut down, perhaps as soon as this winter.

“We’ve never had to fight to save trees after they’ve been marked before,” said Don Shelters, conservation officer for the Zoar Valley Paddling Club and member of Friends of Zoar Valley.

The densely forested Zoar Valley area along Wickham Road in Cattaraugus County appears to be marked for near total devastation, said Shelters and John Buckley, another member of Friends of Zoar Valley.



This section of Bush Hill State Forest was heavily logged beginning around 2021, according to Suzanne Treyger with Audubon Connecticut and New York. The regrowth of the understory and open canopy creates ideal breeding and migrating habitat for many bird species that are seeing steep population declines, she said.

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“At a time when climate change is threatening our existence, we need these big trees to survive,” Buckley said.

But those wanting to cut down the trees are environmentalists, too.

Ninety-two acres of the **Zoar Valley Multiple Use Area** are slated for a bird habitat improvement demonstration project by Audubon Connecticut and New York. It involves clear cutting and thinning some forested areas as well as erecting a massive slash wall of cut trees to keep deer out, according to Suzanne Treyger, the organization’s senior program manager of forests in New York and Connecticut.

“Things will certainly look different when the cutting begins,” Treyger said. “But this is for the overall health of the forest – the more resilient we can make our forests, the better they and the species that rely on them will be able to survive in the face of climate change.”

Audubon’s project in Zoar Valley is expected to create better habitat for birds that have seen massive population declines in recent years, according to Treyger. By cutting certain trees, leaving others, blocking out the deer and managing for invasive plant species, Treyger said the forest will regrow as ideal breeding and migrating habitat for struggling bird species such as the wood thrush, cerulean warbler, American woodcock, prairie warbler and black-throated blue warbler.

“Healthy, old growth forest really is the best habitat, but that’ll take at least another 100 years to get there for these areas,” Treyger said. “A lot of these birds don’t have that much time left. We have to do something now.”

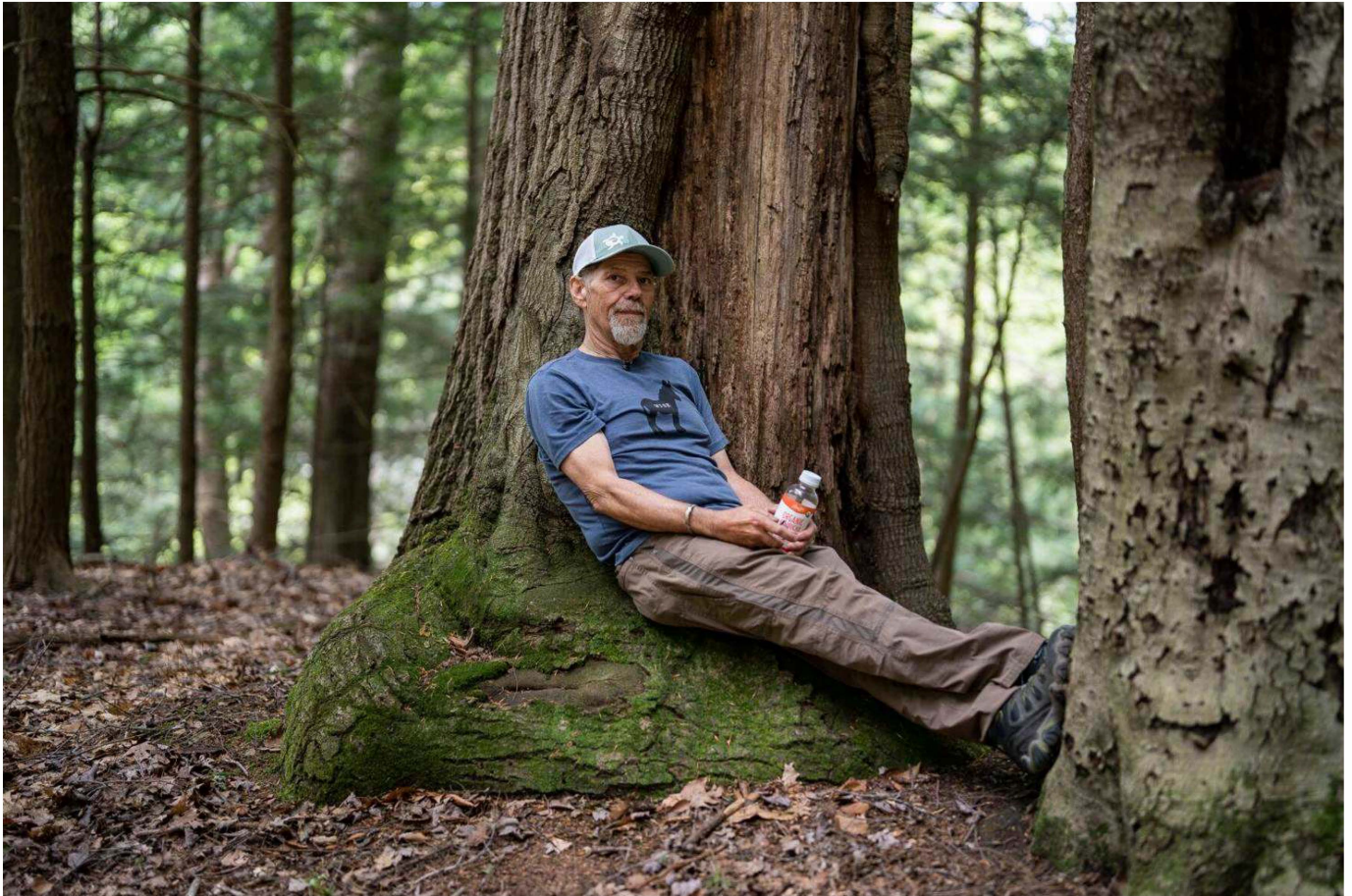


A maple tree estimated to be 80 or 90 years old, marked for logging, within the Zoar Valley Multiple Use Area in Collins, May 9, 2024.

Libby March/Buffalo News

Buckley, Shelters and others with the Friends of Zoar Valley, a local activist group, are gearing up to fight the Audubon Society's logging plan, which is being managed by the New York State Department of Conservation. Cutting any tree in the area would be devastating to the forest's natural progression at a time when more old growth forests are needed because of their ability to capture more carbon from the atmosphere than younger trees, they said.

It appears that Audubon's 92-acre project is just the tip of the iceberg: A **2021 draft plan** for the 2,978-acre Zoar Valley area may allow for nearly 900 acres to be logged over the next 10 years, according to Friends of Zoar Valley.



Don Shelters, a member of Friends of Zoar Valley and a conservation officer for the Zoar Valley Paddling Club, sits under a tree in the densely forested site in Collins on May 9, 2024. He is gearing up to fight the Audubon Society's logging plan, which is being managed by the DEC.

Libby March photos, Buffalo News

Fighting for the protection of Zoar Valley's forests isn't new for Buckley and Shelters. Both were among many others who fought for years in the early 2000s to protect 1,492 acres of the area designated as the Zoar Valley Unique Area.

Logging is prohibited in the unique area, which encompasses the gorge and is home to some of New York's last stands of old growth forest.

The remaining acreage of Zoar Valley doesn't enjoy such state protections. Designated as a multiple use area, the DEC has marked hundreds of acres of forest stands for timber and wildlife management – including the 92 acres of the Audubon's project – under a draft plan.

“We’re calling it graffiti now because they’re not going to cut down the trees, they’re going to leave them,” Shelters said of the orange paint marking the trees in the Audubon’s project area.

Audubon’s project plan for the Zoar Valley hasn’t been released to the public, and cutting is likely to begin this winter, according to the DEC.

“Is there going to be any public notice of this logging? Any opportunities for public participation?” asked Buckley. “I bet not. I bet they’re (the DEC) going to try to get it done before we can stop it.”

The Buffalo News was denied an interview with DEC staff to go over the details of the Audubon project. Instead, a spokesman emailed a statement on behalf of the agency.

“The project was identified in the draft Niagara Frontier Unit Management Plan (UMP), which went through a public review process,” the DEC wrote. “The area is currently forested and will still be forested when the project is complete. Tree selection, or exclusion, is determined based on their species, size, condition and health.”

“The timber harvested will be sold to the highest responsible bidder through a public, competitive bidding process,” the statement continued. “A minimum bid price will be established.”

Example of Audubon project

The Zoar Valley project isn’t Audubon’s first bird habitat project in the region. A 55-acre project in Bush Hill State Forest south of Farmersville in Cattaraugus County was completed in 2023, with the first trees cut in 2021.

There, Audubon selectively cut sections of the forest to open up the forest floor and allow for greater underbrush growth, Treyger explained. By building a massive slash wall around the project site, overabundant deer could not get in and eat young trees trying to grow, she said.

After two full growing seasons, the forest's understory is thick with new growth and there's an obvious and loud din of birds chirping.

Compared with the Zoar Valley project area, the Bush Hill project area is already home to more bird species, according to Treyger's data.

"It's created this mixed forest habitat that's attractive to a variety of birds," she said.

But Shelters and Buckley argue that creating bird habitat shouldn't come at the cost of cutting down valuable trees.

The two noted that the logging plan also seems to go against some of New York Gov. Kathy Hochul's climate initiatives, namely her plan to **plant 25 million trees by 2033** and **preserve 30% of the state's land by 2030**.

"They're (the DEC) basically giving away the forest to logging companies to make a profit," Buckley said. "What happened to the goals of planting more trees? Creating more forests? That's what we need, not this."

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By Mackenzie Shuman
