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CELERY FARM Allendale sanctuary a wild, quiet world

By John Koster
Staff Writer

A few feet off Franklin Turnpike, and less than a half-mile from busy Route 17, an overgrown trail leads to a leafy, marshy world where wild birds and animals live unmolested by man and machine.

It's the Celery Farm, a tract of land in Allendale that will be given to the borough when a state Green Acres grant is approved, perhaps in July. The land is now owned by the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, a Morristown-based group that paid \$170,000 for the land in January. The land was a celery farm in the 1940's and was purchased from the McBride family, the developers.

To bird fanciers like Stiles Thomas, an Allendale insurance broker and county-wide bird expert, who toured the tract yesterday, it is the buy of a lifetime.

Three habitats

Locked between Franklin Turnpike, a farm and development tract, and an L-shaped leg of the Allendale Brook, the Celery Farm provides wild birds with three different habitats — woodlands, meadows, and marsh — and includes two swampy canals that host herons and other waterfowl, as well as a natural spring-fed pond with a surface area of almost an acre.

"It's all very wet," says Thomas. "That's what makes it so valuable to wildlife."

The 60 acres seem more like 600 from the inside, because of the thick foliage and the twisting trails. And touring the Celery Farm with Thomas is as good a way as any to learn about it, since few people know it better or appreciate it more.

The 56-year-old father of three grown daughters is so fond of the rugged property that, last year, he took up tightrope walking to learn to cross the felled trees and slippery waterpipes that make up the only bridges across the swampy streams in the sanctuary. using his ears

as much as his eyes and binoculars, he likes to keep tabs on the bird population.

"That's a cuckoo," he says of one unseen crier. "The cuckoo is one of the few birds that eats caterpillars, even gypsy moth caterpillars, and isn't bothered by the hairs. We need more birds like that. And look at that turkey vulture!"

Red-eyed vireos

Sure enough, soaring high above the woods is a turkey vulture sloping its wings and dropping for an unseen landing in the woods. In short order, Thomas ticks off a green heron, red-winged blackbirds, swallows, mourning doves, Canada geese, mallard ducks, chickadees, thrushes, robins, a hawk, and red-eyed vireos. His favorite is the killdeer, a ground-nesting bird famous for its broken-wing dance, with which it lures potential predators away from its nest. Thomas simulates a predator and pursues the bird, which chirps piteously, luring him on, and then flees once he's far enough away from her unseen nest.

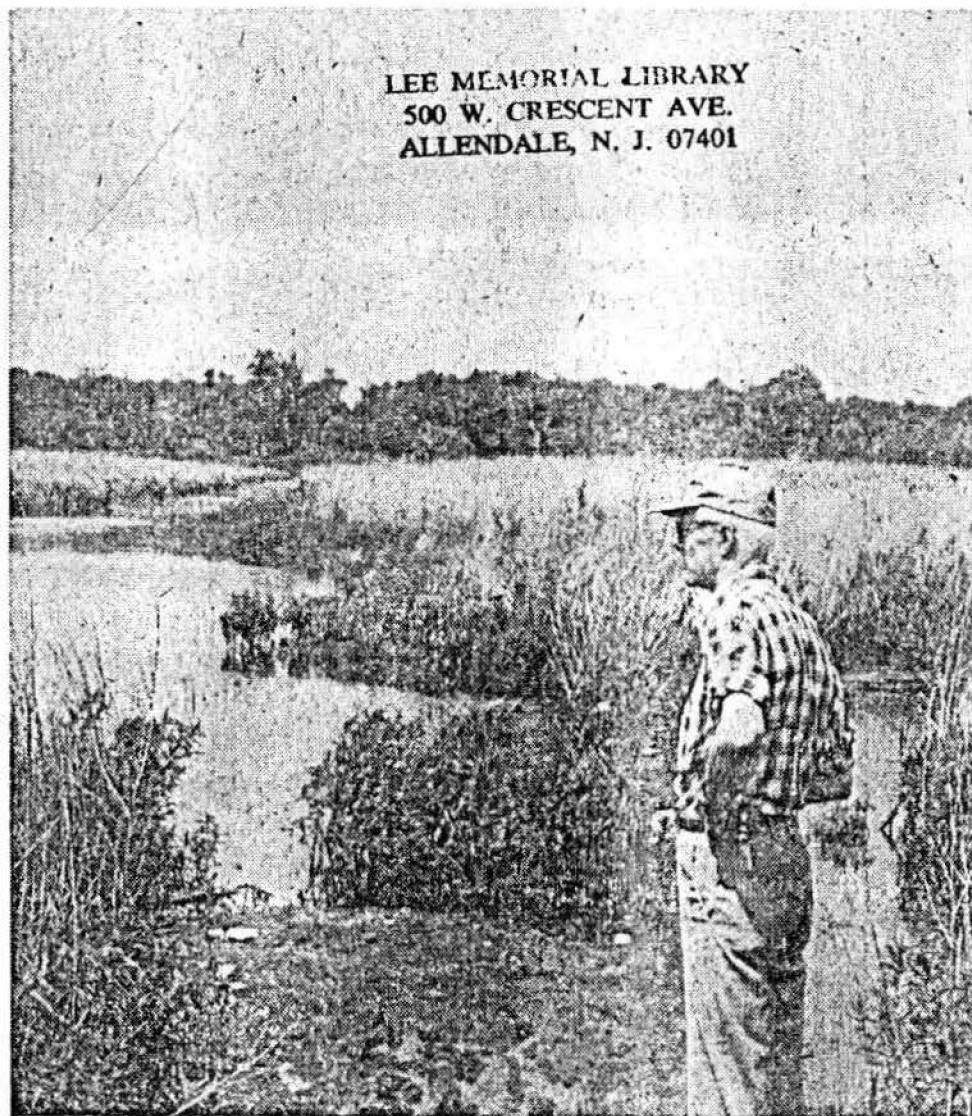
"I'm always careful not to step on the nest," he grins.

The birds, he says, have everything they need right inside the sanctuary. They even grow their own food, in a sense, by eating wild berries and fertilizing and planting the berry seeds in their own droppings.

The wildest and least accessible section of the sanctuary, 15 acres surrounded by streams that is connected to the rest of the tract only by a felled-tree bridge, is deep, silent woodland, a place where even the birds seem hushed and the civilized world could be 100 miles away.

"This was Rogers' pasture when I was a kid," Thomas notes. "The milk often tasted of onions. It's grown back in now."

Besides the 195 species of birds that have been recorded in the past 20 years — including a bald eagle and a peregrine



Staff photo by John Koster

Stiles Thomas of Allendale, at the Celery Farm.

falcone — the site also hosts red fox, muskrats, rabbits, squirrels, raccoons, opossums, and an occasional deer. All hunting, fishing, and trapping is forbidden, but other than that, the land is open to bird-watchers, hikers, and any pic-

nickers who aren't afraid of roughing it on swampy trails and meadows.

"I think it's really great that the borough has been able to preserve all of this," Thomas says with a gleam in his eye. "I only wish it were bigger."