



THE STERLING MESSENGER

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Timber Rattlesnakes Suit US to a Tee: No Golf on Their Course

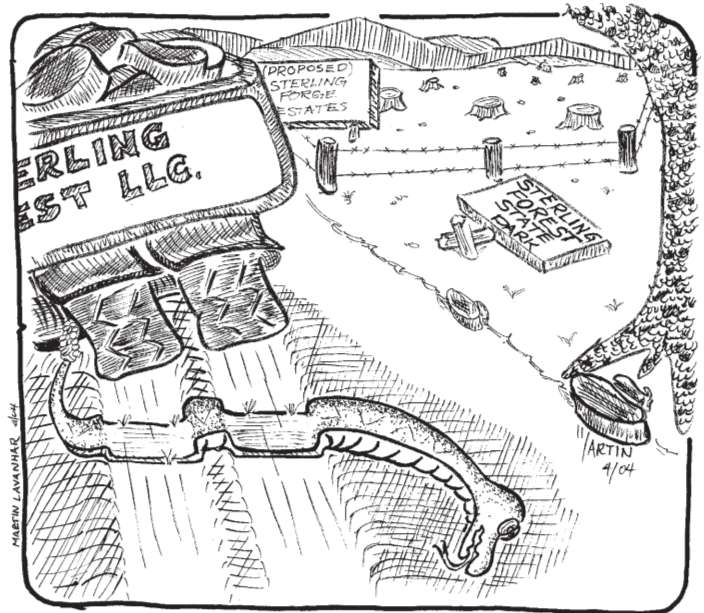
By Mary A. Yrizarry and JoAnn Dolan

Very few of us would happily meet a timber rattlesnake while walking in Sterling Forest State Park – and there are plenty of them around. They inhabit several dens just outside of the Sterling Forge Estates property, and one of their favorite meeting areas is where the Golf Course would have been built.

Timber rattlesnakes are a threatened species in New York and Sterling Forest State Park is known as perhaps their richest and most important habitat in the entire state. The NY State Department of Environmental Conservation takes its mandate to keep them off the endangered species list very seriously and has been quite aggressive in their protection in the past several years. For this reason, the DEC required the Sterling Forest Corporation to conduct two years of radio telemetry studies on the timber rattlesnakes to determine the extent of their presence on the planned development. The DEC reviewed these studies, and issued its conclusion in March: the data unequivocally shows a degree of interaction between snakes of different dens in the golf course area east of Long Meadow Road sufficient to preclude any development there. In addition, the Corporation is required to continue studies this summer to track snakes from two dens close to the property on the west side of County Route 84 to determine the extent, if any, of timber rattlesnake activity in the area where construction of homes is planned.

Consequently, Louis Heimbach, CEO of Sterling Corporation LLC, has conceded that the proposed golf course will not be built.

This is a major victory for all of us – your support and encouragement has helped win this battle. No longer do we have to worry about chemical runoff into Tuxedo Lake drinking water from the golf course with its possible human consequences. And this particularly rich and sensitive ecological niche, with its wetlands, marshes, woodland, animal and plant species will also be protected forever, at least on the east side of Long Meadow Road.



STOPPING THIS DEVELOPMENT WOULD BE
A SLAM DUNK, IF I WERE A KAOLA BEAR.

This is not the end of the struggle, however. There continue to be pressing issues, not the least of which is whether **any** development of this kind should be permitted to denigrate the Sterling Forest State Park Preserve, which was purchased with \$80 million of public and private funds.

Sterling Forge Estates: What's Next?

It took from January 2002, when the public hearings closed on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for Sterling Forge Estates, until October 2003 before a fresh Draft Supplemental EIS was finally submitted for acceptance to the Tuxedo Town Board. "Supplemental" because the first document raised so many questions, requiring so much new information in response, that a fresh hearing was necessary. The Town Board needed to consider the developer's answers before it could accept the "supplemental" statement as a complete draft, permitting work on a Final EIS to begin.

The Tuxedo Town Board reviewed the DSEIS with its advisors, and was about accept it at the October 2003 meeting when our consultant, Steve Gross, pointed out that the timber rattlesnake study had

not been finished and reviewed by the NY State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and therefore the document could not be accepted as complete. The Town Board then referred the completeness issue to NYSDEC requesting a written response from them with regard to the rattlesnake study. The response from NYSDEC came in March 2004, essentially disallowing the development of the golf course.

Sterling Forest Corp. has said it will submit a

Development Would Affect Golden-Winged Warblers in Sterling Forest

By John Confer

The golden-winged warbler (*Vermivora chrysoptera*) was common in most of New England as late as the 1960s and 1970s, but is now extirpated from Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New Hampshire and reduced to 4 known nesting sites in Connecticut and is rapidly declining in New Jersey and much of New York. This decline is due to reduction of habitat and to competition with the invading blue-winged warbler (*V. pinus*).

Sterling Forest State Park is the only region documented with peer review in which golden-winged and blue-winged warblers have coexisted for over 50 years. The relative abundance of golden-winged warblers in Sterling Forest State Park is especially significant. There are probably more golden-winged warblers nesting in the Sterling Forge Estates project site than there are in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island and New Hampshire taken together, although just a few decades ago these states supported large populations.

Because of the unique sustained abundance in this area while populations in all surrounding areas are collapsing, the Sterling Forest State Park population is a nationally significant population. Protection of the entire population in this area, including those that occur within Sterling Forge Estates project site, is nationally important to sustaining this critically small population. Studies in this area may help to determine factors critical to their survival that may be applicable to national efforts to protect golden-winged warblers.

(The author, an authority on golden-winged warblers, is Associate Professor of Biology at Ithaca College.)

new development plan to the Tuxedo Town Board of perhaps 110 houses but without the golf course. This probably not come before the current timber rattlesnake study is completed and approved by the NYSDEC sometime this fall or winter. The Sterling Forest Partnership is not just sitting around waiting for the other shoe to drop. Our consultants continue to review the DSEIS, and continue to expose many flaws in the environmental data found there. In addition, we are launching a more active campaign to engage the public and elected officials to understand the great threat this development will have on the public and private financial investment in the State Park.

Contact Your Legislators and State Officials

Now is the time to rally to save the very heart of Sterling Forest.

For the past three years *The Sterling Messenger* has reported about efforts to coordinate a thorough analysis of the impact of development on a 571-acre inholding in the center of Sterling Forest State Park.

The Sterling Forest Partnership, with a small network of people, reviewed, analyzed and responded throughout the environmental review process to date. Many of you came out to speak at public hearings.

Now we need the critical mass— grass roots citizens—to express concern about the negative impact this development plan will have on our Park. We need to ask our representatives for support to complete a job nearly done, to protect all of Sterling Forest.

Below are talking points. Please contact legislators and officials on the list with a personal message by letter, e-mail, phone or fax. Every voice counts!

Talking points:

- Sterling Forest State Park Preserve stands as a 20,000-acre public legacy of national significance. This was the result of an unprecedented cooperative effort to raise \$80,000,000 in funding from federal, bi-state and private sources to protect the Sterling Forest region. Of this, \$17.5 million was federally funded.

- The 571-acre inholding in the heart of Sterling Forest State Park Preserve may jeopardize this legacy. Sterling Forest Corporation seeks permits to build Sterling Forge Estates on a site of bedrock that will require significant blasting. The location of this development parcel poses a threat to Park resources and neighboring water systems. Development will visually mar the Park and the viewshed

of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail and the Sterling Ridge Trail (a section of the Highlands Trail).

- Sterling Forest, on the border of New York and New Jersey, is in the center of the Highlands. It is a "green lung" for a rapidly growing metropolitan region, and is a significant part of a watershed that provides drinking water for 2 million people. The park land is rich in Native American and Revolutionary War history, and is a protective corridor for the Appalachian Trail. Sterling Forest is extraordinarily rich in natural resources, and has been designated as a State Bird Conservation Area.

- Residents worry about pollution from storm water runoff; environmentalists are alarmed by its potential impact on the Ramapo River and reservoir systems; scientists are concerned about forest fragmentation and the poor quality of species data found in the applicant's Draft Supplemental EIS; and Park supporters are concerned about the resulting destruction of habitat, visual beauty and serenity within the park preserve.

- Most of the state officials and legislators listed have played a role in protecting Sterling Forest and we thank them for their leadership. We urge them to work with their colleagues and support the funding necessary to complete a job nearly done.

Contact List for New York

The Honorable George Pataki

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The Honorable Rodney P. Frelinghuysen

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Yes, I support the Partnership

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Please make checks payable to :
Sterling Forest Partnership
Box 303
Tuxedo, NY 10987

The Sterling Forest Partnership, Inc. is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of Sterling Forest as an open space. Contributions to the Sterling Forest Partnership are tax deductible to the full extent of the law.

Ramapo College Students Study Sterling Forest Hemlocks

by Eric Wiener, Assistant Professor at RCNJ

In recent decades, hemlock woolly adelgids (HWAs), which are native to Asia, have killed many eastern hemlock trees. The unfortunate impact of HWAs can be seen in Sterling Forest State Park. In some areas of the park, dense stands of hemlock "skeletons" are all that remain. In other areas, some hemlocks still have most of their needles, while others are dead or just barely holding on to a few, sparsely needled branches. As part of a senior Capstone field course about forest ecosystems, Ramapo College of New Jersey students conducted a field practicum that examined why some hemlock trees at Sterling Forest have died, while other

nearby hemlocks continue to survive. Focusing on a small plot, the class measured numerous environmental variables such as elevation, steepness and aspect of slope, and the tree species composition in the immediate area of each hemlock. Interestingly, the only variable that correlated with hemlock health was the presence or absence of chestnut oak trees. All of the dead hemlocks had chestnut oak neighbors, while the live hemlocks did not.

Students recognized that chestnut oaks are generally indicators of dry, thin soils. They hypothesized that hemlocks growing in moister microhabitats may be more able to tolerate HWAs. Results are preliminary at best, and the students concluded that more thorough research should be conducted to determine the validity of their hypothesis.

SF Partnership Joins OCOSA

OCOSA (Orange County Open Space Alliance) is a coalition of like-minded organizations working toward a shared goal of preserving open space in Orange County. Its first task is to develop a public alert system via the internet through each member organization. The Partnership would like to be able to contact its supporters and friends by email on issues, events, legislation and activities concerning open space in our area.°If you would like to receive information on these issues in Orange County you can help by sending your email address to John Arbo at jarbo@optonline.net° This is the quickest way we can get information out to you on a timely basis.

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