

Rice Creek:

a place of
wonder...
and
learning

by Michele Reed





XUAN WU '09

There's a place on campus where you can watch a deer graze placidly just a few feet from your nose or see a hawk glide majestically on a thermal air mass. You can hear the crunch of autumn leaves underfoot or smell the luscious scent of mint.

That place of wonder is Rice Creek Field Station, located on Thompson Road just over a mile from the college's main entrance. It's a home for science classes, faculty and student research projects, and programs for community children, their families and teachers.

Oswego has a tradition of hands-on education. Ever since Edward Austin Sheldon introduced his object method of teaching, the college has championed learning by doing. That was the idea behind Rice Creek Field Station, which was conceived more than 45 years ago and is still going strong.

It is a 300-acre jewel among the college's holdings and it includes a pond, herb and flower gardens, and approximately 7.5 miles of nature trails.

Herons and cranes gather around the pond, searching for the fish they love to eat. They share the waters with geese and ducks.



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JIM RUSSELL '83



Professor C. Eric Hellquist, left, and **Tom Burns '10** examine vegetation at Rice Creek.

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Jennifer Lee '10 prepares to videotape birds feeding at a ground feeder during her study at Rice Creek.

Squirrels and raccoons are observed regularly through the indoor viewing gallery at the station building, which includes two lab classrooms, a lecture room and exhibit areas.

The fields and woods are home to rabbits, foxes and chipmunks. The skies are filled with bluebirds, cardinals, woodpeckers and mourning doves. Walking among the Virginia creeper, dogwood or wild grapes, a visitor can read the plants' names on identifying plaques.

On a sunny summer day the happy shouts of children resound as they chase butterflies with nets, wade into the stream to catch crayfish or identify wildflowers that line the trails.

Spring and fall may see professors and their students trapping and releasing small animals to study their habits, observing turtles and fish in the pond or hunting for plants for a botany course.

Even in winter, observers catch sight of the tracks of animals in the snow, while students and community members ski or snowshoe on the peaceful trails winding through the woods.

*"We can
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—DR. LUCINA HERNANDEZ
DIRECTOR OF RCFS



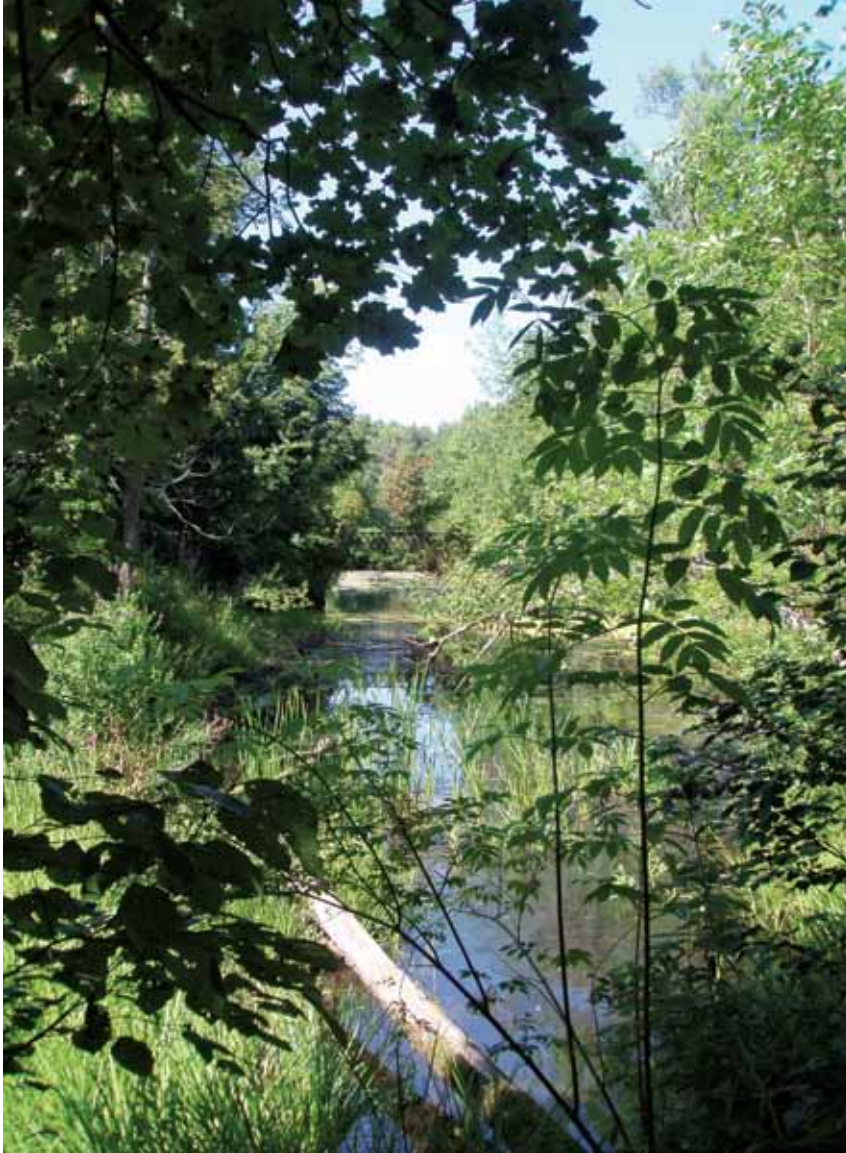
DIANN JACKSON M'89



Mission of Research and Outreach

"Rice Creek Field Station is very close to the campus and that makes it easier to make that link between the scientific studies, the education for our university and the education for the public," said Dr. Lucina Hernandez, professor of biology and director of the station.

"One focus I am interested in is monitoring the changes in vegetation or communities of plants and animals due to global climate change," said



From left, **Shelda Dorsainvil '10**, **Matt Mattson '11** and **Zach Meyer '11** check instruments during a wetlands ecology class this past September.

Hernandez, who came to Oswego from Mexico, taking over the reins at Rice Creek a year and a half ago. “We can start doing something significant in science for Central New York.”

Dr. Diann Jackson M’89, assistant director, agrees. “I think any natural place that lets people learn about science and learn about their role in taking care of our environment, our earth and the stewardship of our resources is worth protecting, is worth maintaining,” she said.

“You never know what you are going to find when you take a walk on the trail or look out at the birdfeeder and the ponds,” said Jackson, who has worked at the field station for 27 years. “There’s a sense of wonder that I feel every day that I come to work.”

Two Centuries of History

It’s just possible that the same sense of wonder welled up in Asa and Elizabeth Rice when the pioneers settled the area of the field station in 1797. The Rices and their eight children had made a difficult trip up the Mohawk River, across Oneida Lake and down the Oneida and Oswego rivers. While making their way down the shore of Lake Ontario they landed at the mouth of Three Mile Creek, now Rice Creek. There they made a new life for themselves and their family amid the forbidding terrain.

The land they settled and the farming community that grew up around it would become Rice Creek Field Station. The area where students today learn and conduct research was devoted to grazing as late as 1955, and a horse pasture until 1963 is now a young, or pioneer, woodlot. A dairy farm, orchards and crop fields dotted the landscape.

The Oswego College Foundation acquired much of the land between 1961 and 1963 from the Conway, Hilton and DeAmbra families. Science faculty members began to plan the research and instructional station. John Weeks, emeritus professor of biology, helped

to design the field station and the fish ladder that is fed by the pond, along with New York state engineers. Boy Scouts cut up logs for the original boardwalk. Construction was completed in 1966 and the field station was ready to welcome students, researchers and visitors.

Hands-On Study

“I remember my cell physiology project dealing with crayfish internal fluid sampling along the Creek — getting out collecting and sampling, then the lab work — ah, what memories!!” said **Ed Currier '68**, who did the initial water quality study of Rice Creek from source to mouth in 1967 as an independent study directed by Professor Ron Engel.

“I became a life sciences teacher and was able to bring my middle school classes there several years for some great environmental experiences. The station had such an impact on me that my master’s degree work later involved the creation of a nature study center at my

middle school — Wayne Middle School in Ontario Center, where I taught science for 37 years before my retirement in 2005.”

George Maxwell was first official director and the longest serving. He was followed by Engel and J. Alden Lackey. Don Cox took over the leadership in the early '80s and stayed 10 years. Sigurd Nelson was next, serving three years, followed by Andy Nelson, who held the director’s post for 14 years. Upon Nelson’s retirement, Hernandez took over.

In 1972, a group of zoology faculty members named one of the trails the Carlita Snygg Memorial Trail in honor of their colleague, who was well known as a naturalist, through her popular columns in the *Oswego Palladium-Times*. She was the wife of Professor Donald Snygg.

There have been many changes over the years, and Jackson has seen most of them. “The biggest part of our facilities is the outdoors and over the almost 30 years I’ve been here the habitats have

changed greatly,” she said. “Forests and meadows have aged and led to new plants and animals.”

She pointed out improvements like the covered pavilion used for outdoor classes and a picnic area for visitors. The addition of an herb garden, planted by Ruth Sachidanadan, the wife of emeritus faculty member Gubbi Sachidanadan, complements other flower gardens near the buildings.

An extensive renovation is planned as part of the college’s effort to renovate and improve science facilities.

Because it is a living space, Rice Creek Field Station will continue to change and grow. One thing will remain the same: It will always be a valuable resource for students and faculty to hold classes and conduct research and for community members to learn about science and nature in a hands-on way. Edward Austin Sheldon would be proud. ●

*Editor’s note: Research for this article contributed by **Matthew Urtz '02**.*



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60