

From January 1996 Raven's Nest:

**BEAVER LAKE SANCTUARY--HOW IT ALL BEGAN
Scott Parker**

Many of our members are not aware of a major project that the Elisha Mitchell Chapter is involved with on a daily basis. We are one of the few chapters across the country that owns a nature preserve--to do it we raised over half a million dollars to purchase and improve the site we now call Beaver Lake Bird Sanctuary in North Asheville. The following is a synopsis of how we became involved in the property over 8 years ago and how we continue to struggle between public access and preservation of the property that was scheduled for commercial development.

NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK.

Back in 1987 a dozen people with similar interests got together at Pack Library to explore the idea of creating an Asheville Audubon Society. An Audubon staff person from the regional office--then located in Charleston, SC--met with the group and explained how we could form a local chapter. Among other duties we had to recruit 50 new members, organize committees, publish a newsletter, hold public meetings, elect a board, seek non-profit 501-C status, etc. After several months of hard work we were given our charter and became the Elisha Mitchell Audubon Society, taking our name from Dr. Elisha Mitchell, who first accurately measured the highest peak east of the Mississippi, and whose name was subsequently used to identify Mount Mitchell.

One of the requirements for maintaining chapter status was the involvement by the chapter in a major conservation project. With the ink still wet on our charter, we were asked to meet with a neighborhood group concerned with a developer's plans to build a 28-store shopping mall near a marsh in North Asheville.

JUMPING INTO THE FIRE.

A local developer had unveiled plans for a shopping mall.

When local residents went before local city government to oppose the developer, they were told that nothing could be done as the property had already been zoned commercial. The group then filed suit to keep the developer tied up long enough to somehow come up with enough money to offer to buy the property and prevent development, which residents feared would increase traffic near a residential area, cause the decline in property values, and in general detrimentally affect the integrity of the neighborhood.

When the group came to our chapter, we became involved primarily because of the potential harm a complex of that nature could have on the adjacent marsh area with its wide variety of water birds, song birds, plant life, and unique urban proximity.

Approaching the developer, we were told there would be no negotiations and in fact the only way to prevent development of the property was to pay the developer \$400,000, which reflected the price of the 3.86-acre tract plus the "additional expenses" of preparing the site for development. With preservation of the property as our main goal, our chapter founding board voted to become involved in the project and, in fact, became the lead players in the effort.

STEP BY STEP.

We began our campaign by informing the public about the project. We were able to make a neighborhood project into a city-wide effort--garden clubs, civic groups, scout troops, school children, and citizens joined in. Local, regional, and national foundations were approached for funds to help purchase the property and implement a nature preserve. We held festivals, T-shirt sales, sold square inches, spoke to Kiwanis clubs, garden clubs, neighborhood associations--anyone who would listen.

We raised enough money to purchase a 60-day option on the property in late 1988. That gave us enough time to contact the Trust for Public Land in Tallahassee, Florida. The Trust is a nationally-recognized conservation organization that can loan groups funds to protect green spaces. In fact, the Trust represented our chapter in negotiations with the developer. At our disposal were accountants, real estate experts, attorneys--everything we didn't know how to do, they did.

With public funds approaching \$100,000 and a respected land trust coordinating our negotiations with the developer, a local foundation--the Janirve Foundation--awarded a \$100,000 matching grant. By 1989 we had convinced both the City of Asheville and Buncombe County to each contribute \$50,000. By fall of 1989 we were only \$25,000 short of the funds needed to purchase the property and the last option was scheduled to expire January 1 of 1990. A local businessman agreed to donate \$20,000 to the project and by January 1 we had raised the funds needed to take ownership of the property. Our first goal had been met--we had saved the property from commercial development.

THIS IS GOING TO BE FUN?

We kept telling ourselves that the real work was over and planning the Sanctuary and overseeing the improvements would be the fun part. The fun part began in 1991. Plans for our improvements were unveiled and Phase I of that plan would include a parking area, tree plantings along Merrimon Avenue, stone work, a gazebo, and impressive leveling of the site. With the aid of a retired landscape architect, work began in 1992 and continues today.

We have raised over \$75,000 towards improvements that will eventually include a boardwalk, extensive trails, educational display, and more. We have \$20,000 on hand to begin construction of the boardwalk in early 1996.

...AND THEY DID!