

# Piece by Piece

Farmington Hunt Club and John "J.B." Birdsall  
win the 2011 Hunting Habitat Conservation Award.

BY ELIZABETH H. SUTTON

**The Farmington Hunt Club** hunting territory covers gently rolling land at the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

**A**t the annual meeting on January 28, 2011, the coveted Hunting Habitat Conservation Award sponsored by the Masters of Foxhounds Association was presented to the Farmington Hunt Club and John Birdsall of Charlottesville, Virginia, in recognition of their leadership and personal efforts in protecting over 65,000 acres of land by conservation easement.

The Farmington Hunt Club has been a prominent community institution in Albemarle County, Virginia, since its establishment in 1929. Masters, officers, directors and most voting members of the hunt have their principal residences within the hunt's registered territory or in the nearby Charlottesville area. All members are keenly aware of the importance of land conservation in their territory that encompasses fourteen square miles, including the northwestern section of the

county, southeastern Albemarle along the Hardware and James Rivers near Scottsville and the area of Greene and Fluvanna Counties bordering Albemarle south of Route 33.

One leading landowner and long-standing member of the Farmington Hunt Club deserves credit for this accomplishment: Mr. John "J.B." Birdsall. Mr. Birdsall is an avid outdoorsman, an active foxhunter and is married to Mary Scott Birdsall, a Charlottesville native whose family home was the historic Schelford Farm, situated at the heart of the Farmington Hunt territory. The third generation of their family continues to be active in the Farmington Hunt field today. Since the Birdsalls moved back to Virginia in 1987, J.B. has been the principal driving force in establishing a culture of land conservation and habitat preservation within the Farmington Hunt. The result of that cultural partnership is

a success story that is unmatched in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Twenty-three Farmington fixtures are preserved by conservation easement. The Farmington Hunt has approximately 30 fixtures listed in its directory as hunt meet locations, with more land adjoining over which the hunt has permission to hunt. Of this, the Birdsalls own, control, or have been influential in the conservation of most of them. According to Sherry Buttrick of the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, the Birdsalls "placed their first property [known locally as Percy Wood] in conservation easement in 1984 and have donated a total of 12 conservation easements on over 1,700 acres, the most recent being last month." Some of Farmington's hunt country that has been saved from rampant development is located less than five miles from the nearest shopping area.





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**Hounds and staff return home** after a meet last March, 2010, at Schelford farm, home of Mary Scott and J.B. Birdsall. Schelford lies in the heart of the Farmington Hunt country, and is located just minutes from the city of Charlottesville. It has been home to three generations of the Birdsall family since 1950.

The northwest portion of hunt country is made up of smaller farms and tree-lined fields at the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains near Free Union and Earlysville, Virginia. Hunting access is kept up over well-maintained trails through areas of mixed hardwood and pine forest that blanket gently rolling hills interlaced with small streams flowing into the Moormans,

Mechums and Rivanna rivers. The country also includes uncultivated farm fields specifically left as undisturbed habitat for wildlife, as well as open pasture grazing for beef and dairy cattle. Shrubs, wetland cover and streamside farms are not uncommon, and in the southern portion of the territory one finds crops ranging from open cultivated hay to grain fields.

curately quantify the impact that the Birdsalls have had on land conservation within the Farmington Hunt territory. Their affiliation with the PEC goes back to at least the early 1980s and throughout that time they have been staunch advocates for private, voluntary land conservation through the use of conservation easements.

“Since starting with PEC many years ago,” adds Linville, “J.B. has consistently and generously offered me his time and expertise in working with landowners in the region. The land conservation success that PEC and the community have been able to achieve would not have been possible without his efforts.”

Birdsall has also made a difference in the land conservation movement well beyond the Farmington Hunt. As a tireless advocate for land conservation, Birdsall worked closely with both landowners and lawmakers. One of his greatest accomplishments was assisting in making major changes in the tax code. “He was directly involved with lobbying (many members of Congress — not just from Virginia) and working with PEC staff to make this happen,” explains Linville. “This resulted in the creation of Section 2031(c) of the IRC, which now allows landowners to exclude up to 40 percent of the value of their property from their taxable estate.” While this exclusion is capped at \$500,000, J.B. is



CATHY SUMMERS

**John “J.B.” Birdsall** on his hunting mare, Emma, crossing the Moormans River below Millington Farm at the annual Junior Meet, November 2009.

Over many decades, numerous Farmington members have taken on leadership positions within the conservation community, lending their considerable diligence, commitment and professional skills to the cause of land conservation. In addition to holding board positions on the Nature Conservancy, the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, the County Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors, the hunt club has two members, including Birdsall, who serve on the Board of Directors of the Piedmont Environmental Council (PEC), the leading conservancy in Virginia and in the vanguard of land use production nationwide. The PEC was formed in 1972 to protect and promote the Piedmont region’s rural economy, natural resources, history and beauty. The Piedmont region includes Clarke, Albemarle, Orange, Madison, Greene, Culpeper, Fauquier, Loudon and Rapahannock Counties.

PEC local conservation officer Rex Linville explains, “It is difficult to adequately and ac-

one of the primary sponsors of PEC's and the Land Trust Alliance's effort to expand this further so that the exclusion is 50 percent with a \$5,000,000 cap.

While J.B. lobbied publicly for change, a quiet presence behind the scenes was working to support his efforts. His wife of over forty years, Mary Scott Birdsall, introduced J.B. to the sport of foxhunting when they were both students together at the University of Virginia in the 1960s. Her family has been at Schelford since 1950 when her parents bought the property. "I always loved the idea of open space, from the age of three or four, riding in other countries where it was protected," explains Mrs. Birdsall. Having spent her early childhood in Ireland and Germany where her horse-loving father was stationed overseas, she has fond memories of Ireland in particular, and remembers her mother tramping over the countryside in her "wellies." She credits her parents for instilling in her an appreciation for the beauty and a love of the land, and notes that when she and J.B. came home to Virginia for good, they wanted to do something to make sure that their land would be preserved for the future. "When we bought Percy Wood," she says, "we had one set of eyes seeing it with

hopes that the same view would still be there for others in generations to come."

On a personal level, J.B. explains that he couldn't be more pleased at receiving this prestigious reward. "Years ago, when I was serving as vice chairman at PEC, the chair was Charlie Whitehouse who was Master at Orange County. He and I spent a great deal of time talking about how important it was to get the hunt clubs in the Piedmont to actively engage in the land conservation effort, and if memory serves me correctly Charlie, along with Jimmy Young, was responsible for initiating the Conservation Award through the MFHA; and, I think, Orange County was one of the first recipients. So, full circle, I'm really happy for Farmington to be in the same company as Orange County, and my only sadness is that neither Charlie nor his successor as chair at PEC, Eve Fout, are still with us to see how far their pioneering work has come."

The Hunting Habitat Conservation award was first given in 1997 during James Young's presidency of the MFHA. Past recipients include the legendary Mrs. Nancy Han-num and Mr. Stewart's Cheshire Hounds in Pennsylvania, Mrs. Virginia "Ginnie" Moss and the Moore County Hounds in Southern

Pines, North Carolina, and more recently Mrs. Wingate "Winkie" Mackay-Smith and the Blue Ridge Hunt.

According to MFHA Executive Director Dennis Foster, the recipient of the honor must be primarily a hunt and an individual that has "done something to make a significant difference" in land conservation. "By bringing land conservation into the spotlight of public attention, the hope is that more hunts will follow the leadership of the fine individuals and hunt clubs who have made a contribution to the common goal of preserving land," says Sherry Buttrick, Virginia Outdoors Foundation head and longtime advocate of the award.

"It sends a strong statement out to the community," adds Foster. "By accepting this honor, J.B. Birdsall offered a challenge to foxhunters, especially in our state of Virginia: 'If you care about horses and hounds, you must support PEC. Involve yourself in conservation.'" 🍎

**Elizabeth H. "Beth" Sutton** lives in Albemarle County, Va., and is a member of the Farmington Hunt. She is the author of "A Pony for Keeps" and other children's books. Her work has appeared in *Albemarle, Virginia Living*, the *Thoroughbred Times*, *Hurlingham Magazine* and *Virginia Sportsman*.

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