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## Where the wild things are

By MADELINE BODIN

The stretch of Route 7 in Wallingford does not look like a wildlife hotspot. It looks like any other stretch of busy Rutland County highway. Cars and trucks whiz by. Bottles and wrappers lay in the brush beside it. The shoulder is dusted with sand and gravel.

On a warm day in April, George Leoniak and Monica Erhart hiked a mile-long stretch of the highway searching for evidence of wildlife. Given the location, the most surprising thing may be that they found it. About half way through their hike, they paused by a tree-sheltered embankment on the east side of the road.

"You can see how the deer came down here," said Leoniak, a professional tracker based in Marlboro. He used two fingers to mimic the hoof of a deer, and demonstrated to Erhart how the track showed the deer was traveling from east to west, digging in the points of its hoof as it descended the slope.

Erhart is the Linkage Coordinator in Rutland and southern Addison counties for the Staying Connected Initiative. Staying Connected brings together about 20 different conservation organizations and state agencies across the northeastern United States and Canada to enhance the connectivity between the big chunks of wildlife habitat in the region. The project aims to link conservation areas from the Tug Hill Plateau in central New York, across the northern Appalachian Mountains through Vermont, to the Gaspé Peninsula in Quebec.

In Vermont, the state agency partners are the Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Agency of Transportation, and the conservation organization partners include the Vermont Land Trust and the local offices of The Nature Conservancy and the National Wildlife Federation.

Erhart joined Leoniak on part of his spring tracking survey because she wanted to experience the project at the tracks-in-the-dirt level. The project has identified the area of Rutland and southern Addison Counties as an important bridge between the wildlife habitat in Adirondack Mountains of New York and the Green Mountains.

Further, it had identified specific places in Rutland and Addison Counties that were likely wildlife-travel corridors, based on maps and information about landscape types. The project also identified potential barriers along those corridors, such as state highways, and hired Leoniak to have a closer look.

Leoniak explains that the project focuses on large, wide-ranging species, such as

bear, bobcat, fisher, and moose because these animals depend most on connections between desirable habitats.

Leoniak and Erhart found only one trackway possibly used by carnivores that April day. But during a survey last winter, Leoniak had found many bobcat tracks along Route 7 in Wallingford, including one cluster among the cliff-like rocks of a road cut and another that followed a hedgerow between two homes that were not more than a few dozen yards apart.

While it's Leoniak's job to collect this data, it's Erhart's job as the program's linkage coordinator for the Rutland region to get the word out that there are important wildlife areas among us, even on busy stretches of Route 7, and to help towns and organizations work with that information.

Erhart says that her mission is to serve as a resource to groups in the area that are interested in conserving these wildlife corridors. The exact form those actions take is up to the group. "Part of it is to ask what their community values are," Erhart says. The project has found that many land uses that keep large areas undeveloped also help keep wildlife habitats connected — including forestry, hunting, maple sugaring, hiking, and snowmobiling.

Since the program got down to business in Vermont last fall, Erhart has worked with the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation on a grant to improve wildlife connectivity and habitat improvement at the Hubbardton Battlefield, says Elsa Gilbertson, Regional Historic Site Administrator for the Division for Historic Preservation. The battlefield didn't get the grant this time around, says Gilbertson. "We'll keep on trying."

Erhart will give a presentation on wildlife connectivity at the Hubbardton Battlefield in June that will include a tour focusing on wildlife.

Erhart is also working with the Hawk Hill Committee in Brandon, which oversees conserved land owned by Otter Valley Union High School. With the Hawk Hill Committee and The Nature Conservancy's Paul Marangelo, she worked on a grant that would bring together the school and the Hawk Hill property in a project that will identify and protect wildlife corridors in the region. The group has not yet heard if they will receive the funds.

"I've been trying to meet with one community at a time," Erhart says. In addition to meeting with select boards and planning commissions, she has been trying to offer community events that not only let her explain wildlife connectivity and the Staying Connected program, but let local residents share the information they already have about their area's wildlife with her. The program is designed to work from the grassroots up, she says. "It's community directed."

When it's Wallingford's turn, Erhart will have information from Leoniak's report and

her own experience in seeing how an ordinary-looking bit of the Vermont landscape can be important to wildlife connectivity. The deer tracks Leoniak found on the side of Route 7 were very close to the spot where he had seen bobcat tracks last winter, indicating that the spot is an active wildlife crossing.

Leoniak's tracking project is a small but visible part of the Staying Connected Initiative, identifying where animals cross the road. Over the coming months Erhart and three other linkage coordinators in northern Vermont will work to make sure the animals get to the other side.

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The Nature Conservancy

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