

Winter 2011

The Nature
Conservancy



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The Oak Log

News From Vermont

Making Connections

Vermont lies at the crossroads of an extensive wildlife habitat network reaching from the Tug Hill plateau in New York, across the Adirondacks and the northern reaches of New England, and on to the Canadian Maritimes. Today wide-ranging species like bear, bobcat, fisher and moose can still move relatively uninhibited through the region to locate sufficient food, cover and over-wintering sites, and to find a mate. Find out how The Nature Conservancy is involved, page 3.

Sue Morse of Keeping Track leads volunteers on a walk to learn to identify animal tracks, just one of the ways to get involved in The Nature Conservancy's efforts to maintain and enhance habitat connectivity. This group is following mink tracks.



Staying Connected

From a bear's viewpoint what is the best way to get from A to B in this area of Bakersfield, Vermont? What obstacles are in the way? How might a bear use forested and wetland 'stepping stones'?

An initiative to secure habitat connectivity



Under the umbrella of The Nature Conservancy-led Staying Connected Initiative, four states and 21 partners have come together to make sure connected habitat and healthy wildlife populations remain an enduring feature of our landscape.

“Over the last 20 years, our understanding of the biological imperative for species to move across the landscape, and the associated importance of habitat connectivity, has expanded dramatically,” said Phil Huffman, Director of Conservation Programs with the Vermont Chapter.

“As a result, conservation strategies are now evolving to take into consideration not only the conservation of large-core habitat areas that are needed to support healthy wildlife populations, but also the landscape connections that are needed to allow movement between areas.”

For the last two years, Staying Connected Initiative (SCI) coordinators in Vermont, Monica Erhart, Bob Hawk and Corrie Miller, have been making connections with individuals, organizations and town leaders to raise awareness and spark interest in the importance of habitat connectivity between the Adirondacks, the Green Mountains and the northern reaches of New England.

Just south of Vermont's border with Canada, in a seven-town area known as Cold Hollow to Canada, volunteers are walking transects — lines criss-crossing forested ridges and valleys — in all four seasons, looking for animal signs. In the Champlain Valley, students from Otter Valley Union High School are co-leading community wildlife walks and teaching workshops for elementary school children based on their own studies of wildlife and habitat connectivity at the school's 230-acre Hawk Hill outdoor classroom. And online, interactive maps are collecting public input on wildlife sightings and tracks in

both the northern and southern Greens. The coordinators are also testing and refining research on where important habitat connections are, and where road crossings may be a barrier to wildlife movement.

“What you are doing is much more important than you are even aware of,” said Bud Snow, a Hawk Hill Committee member and resident of Brandon. “It is a start on ensuring that what we have now, we don't lose for future generations.”

Jens Hilke, Conservation Planning Biologist with the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife, reflected on the importance of the Staying Connected Initiative, with which he has been closely involved.

“Habitat connectivity needs vary greatly, species by species,” Hilke said. “Mass migrations of salamanders on a rainy spring night may only need to move a few hundred feet, whereas bear need to move seasonally between valley wetland food sources in the spring, and nut-producing beech and oak stands on higher hillsides in the fall.

“The ability to move through the landscape is not only important for individual animals but also for maintaining healthy wildlife populations and genetic diversity across the Northeast.”

— Emily Boedecker

SCI core partners include: The Nature Conservancy, Wildlands Network, National Wildlife Federation, Vermont Land Trust, Trust for Public Land, Northeast Wilderness Trust, Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife, Vermont Natural Resources Council, and VTrans.

SCI Partnership Highlights:

- Launched wildlife tracking groups, wildlife sightings websites and public events in 20+ Vermont towns;
- Prompted the inclusion of connectivity provisions in Brandon and Montgomery town plans, and laid the groundwork for zoning revisions in three towns;
- Protected 10,186 acres for habitat connectivity in Vermont and New York;
- Secured funding for landowner action, outreach and technical assistance to communities.

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