



The Berkshire Wildlife Linkage: Connecting the Green Mts to Hudson Highlands for Wildlife and People

Hike the Massachusetts portion of the Appalachian Trail and you'll pass through seven large parks where wildlife and people move unimpeded across the landscape. Along these 90 miles of trail, you'll also cross more than 40 roads. The Berkshire Wildlife Linkage links the vast forests of the Green Mountains in Vermont and the rolling Hudson Highlands in New York. But it's a link that's being divided into smaller and smaller pieces. No matter how large, habitat that is disconnected from other similar habitat becomes an island—with dire consequences for the species living there. Within the Linkage, The Nature Conservancy and partners are maintaining connected habitats and restoring connections between areas fragmented by roads and development. Our vision is both ambitious and achievable:

We envision a landscape stretching from the Green Mountains in Vermont to the Hudson Highlands in New York and beyond, where core habitats are protected as well as corridors between them. People and wildlife of all types, from bears to beetles, move freely and safely: people move along roads, and wildlife and water move under roads. Foxes, otters, salamanders, and other moderately mobile wildlife are our measuring stick. If we are successful, these animals can always reach their next home through a landscape that provides for their needs as well as for ours.

How will we achieve our vision?

1. Fill in the gaps to create a continuous path of protected land in natural cover across western Massachusetts.
(see connectivity areas marked by ovals on map below)
Five-year goal: Complete protection of the path between one pair of forest core habitats.
2. Maintain or increase the ability of animals to cross all major roads within this path.
(see road segments marked by lines on map below)
Five-year goal: Create a wildlife passage under or over high-priority road barriers, focused on the major barriers to north-south movement like Route 2 or the Mass Pike
3. Encourage land stewardship that allows for wildlife movement and maintains the ability of land to produce drinking water and remove greenhouse gases from the air.
Five-year goal: Through landowner outreach programs, connect the need for animals to move in response to climate change to the many other values of forested corridors.

Why is this important?

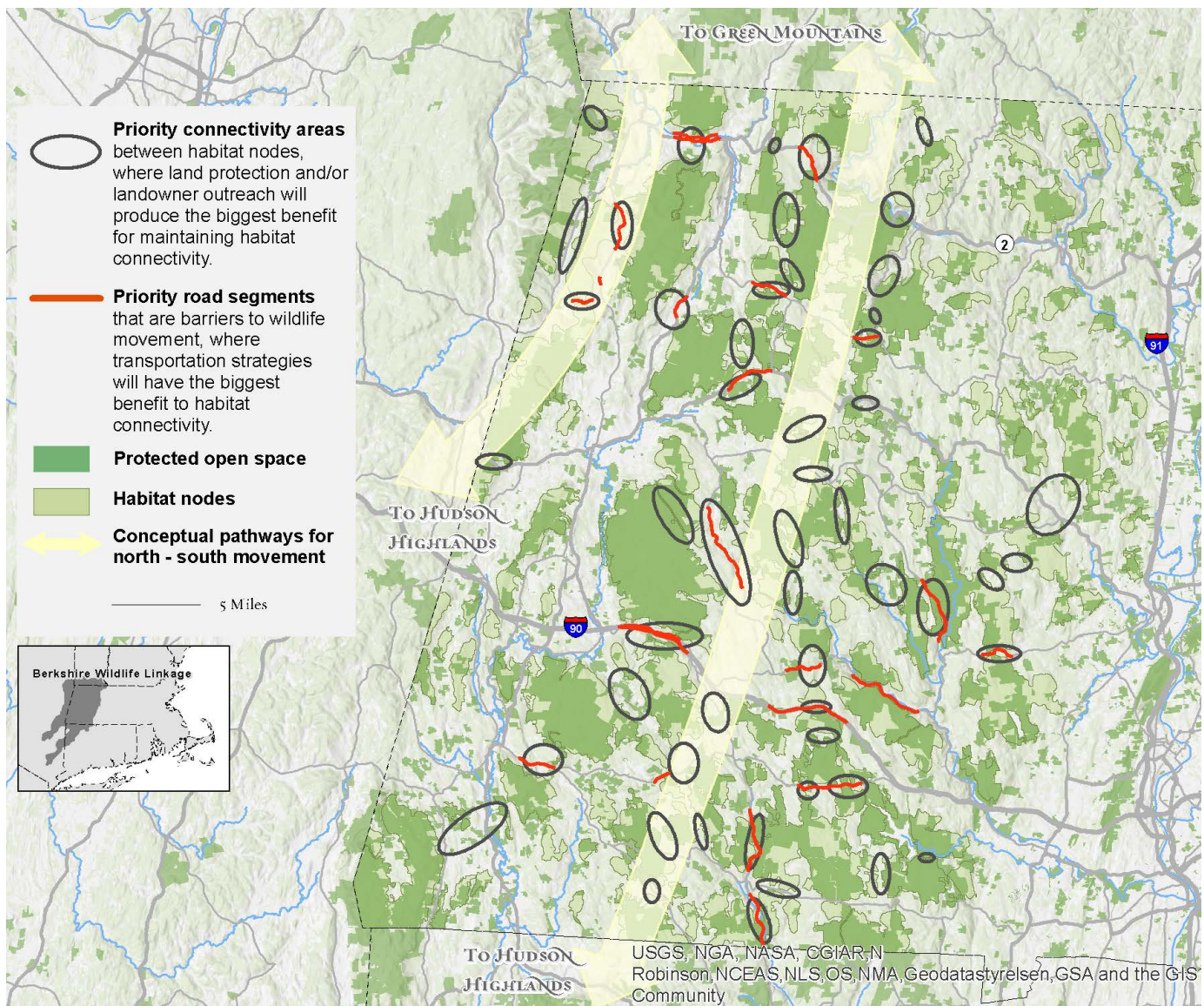
If we do these three things, we can expect less property damage and injury due to animal-vehicle collisions, healthier wildlife populations that can move to adapt to climate change, and a higher quality of life for communities that depend on nature for their livelihood. This approach provides multiple benefits for each investment. For example, replacing an undersized road-stream crossing that washes out after each major storm with a right-sized culvert or bridge that includes portions of the riverbank allows animals to pass underneath the road and reduces the chances of animal-vehicle collisions. At the same time, it improves fish passage and handles floodwaters from storms even as severe as Hurricane Irene.



Bobcat in Berkshire Wildlife Linkage

Where will we take action?

Conserving the Berkshire Wildlife Linkage (Green Mts to Hudson Highlands Linkage) will require strong partnerships between transportation and wildlife agencies, as well as the conservation community. Even so, with millions of acres of forest and thousands of miles of roads, we can't work everywhere. The Nature Conservancy and MassDOT have partnered with UMass-Amherst to identify places where activities like land protection and changes to transportation infrastructure will provide the greatest benefit for wildlife connectivity. The *Critical Linkages* project identifies road segments, road stream crossings, and key habitats that do just that, guiding us to gaps in the continuous path we envision through the landscape (see map below). Within these places, decisions and actions are further informed by wildlife tracking information, location of protected lands, site visits, and local knowledge.



Each winter, the tracks of animals like otters, foxes, and porcupines dot the woods, farm fields, yards, and roadways within the Berkshire Wildlife Linkage. These tracks signal the health of the region—the conditions and habitats that enable these animals to move and thrive are the same ones that enable us to weather storms, live off the land, and enjoy a constant supply of clean water. By considering the impacts of how we choose to develop and manage land, we can ensure that this natural corridor will support both wildlife and human communities well into the future.