

staying connected  
(with photo)  
9-22-10

Wildlife habitat is getting fragmented  
by Bethany M. Dunbar

LOWELL — The Northern Forest ranges from New York to Maine, and it's home to bears, moose, bobcats, fishers, lynx and a catamount or two.

But if groups of those animals are cut off from each other by highways and development, the populations will begin to die off.

These wild animals not only need enough habitat to survive as individuals and small groups, they have to be able to get back and forth and breed with other populations from some distance away so they don't get inbred.

The goal of the Staying Connected Initiative is to get that message out to all the human inhabitants of the same territory, so people can make wise decisions about maintaining sometimes narrow links between large areas of habitat.

Bob Hawk of Walden began thinking about all these issues years ago when he was tracking wildlife in north Greensboro. His education was in political science, economics, and German. For a time he worked with the Vermont Northern Growers Cooperative.

He decided to go back to school for environmental studies and natural resources and got a degree in that field from Johnson State College. A year ago he got a job as linkage coordinator for the Staying Connected Initiative, which is partners with 20 environmental groups including the Vermont Land Trust and the Nature Conservancy. He's been working with five local communities to spread information and get people thinking about habitat on a directly local level in the towns of Eden, Lowell, Westfield, Jay and Troy.

A colleague, Corrie Miller, is doing the same thing in Bakersfield, Belvidere, Enosburg, Fletcher, Montgomery, Richford, and Waterville.

A third coordinator, Chip Knight, covers 30 towns from the Worcester Mountains to the

Northeast Kingdom. The area is marked on the west by Route 100 from Waterbury to Morrisville, by Routes 15 and 14 in the north, I-91 from Orleans to Barnet in the east, and Route 2 to Montpelier, then I-89 in the south.

These coordinators might work with towns, schools, or landowners.

Sometimes Mr. Hawk works with individual landowners who want to know how to "release" a wild apple tree — clear around it and prune it so it will produce more apples. In that case he refers them to an organization called Vermont Coverts which has expertise in that area. Other times he works with landowners who want to set up conservation easements so their land will not be developed.

He might work with a town to set up a town forest or make a trail in that forest so people can walk in the woods and see wildlife, or signs of wildlife, themselves.

Sometimes he helps people or groups get grants to protect or conserve land or to learn more about wildlife.

Mr. Hawk can help towns who are writing town plans to protect natural resources.

A Vermont Supreme Court case, called the JAM Golf case, has changed the effect of town plans. In that case the court ruled that certain language in a town plan was not specific enough for that town to use it to enforce its zoning bylaws.

The plan said the town wanted to: "protect important natural resources including streams, wetlands, scenic views, wildlife habitats, and special features such as mature maple groves."

Mr. Hawk can help towns make their plans specific enough so they won't be overruled.

Hikers, birdwatchers, hunters and fishermen are all affected by loss of habitat.

"Planning is an opportunity to choose a future," Mr. Hawk said.

On Tuesday, October 19, the initiative is sponsoring an evening with Sue Morse of Keeping Track. Ms. Morse is a tracker who will bring along animal mounts, track molds, pelts, skulls, and she will present a slide show of her own dramatic photography of wildlife.

Mr. Hawk got a grant to pay most of the expenses for ten people in the five towns he serves to learn tracking skills with Ms. Morse.

The Staying Connected Initiative is funded by the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service. Mr. Hawk said the initiative does not take political positions in community debates. It is not against development. It just wants people to think about how things get developed and where development happens.

“We have the luxury now to make decisions,” he said. But in 20 years important areas where wildlife live now might be cut off from each other for good.

A map of the Northern Forest with wildlife habitat on it shows several narrow passages from one spot to another within Vermont. If nothing is done to maintain those links or corridors, they will likely be developed over time, Mr. Hawk said.

“There’s a lot that individual landowners can do,” Mr. Hawk said, noting that 81 percent of Vermont is privately owned.

Mr. Hawk said that between 1993 and 2004, 20 percent of Craftsbury’s homes were built.

He also said 525 acres of significant habitat are lost each year in Vermont to development that came under Act 250, which is only one-third of all development. Another statistic he mentioned is that between 1975 and the year 2000 the Vermont road system expanded by 26 miles a year, and the number of miles driven by Vermonters increased seven times the rate of population growth.

Mr. Hawk’s job as linkage coordinator is funded for one more year, and he hopes it will be extended after that.

He said he hopes to emphasize three major points. One, that this area of Vermont is vital for the well-being of wide-ranging mammals from west of the Adirondacks to Maine and Canada.

The second point is that what’s good for wildlife is good for people because protected habitat means healthy water, land, and the economy as wildlife recreation provides jobs. Mr. Hawk said that \$400-million of Vermont’s revenue is tied to wildlife-related recreation.

The third point is that the initiative is not trying to legislate. The people who set policy for the organization believe that if people understand the importance of the threat to wildlife that happens when habitat becomes

fragmented, they will make good decisions within their communities.

“We’re not trying to legislate,” he said.

“We really respect local decision-making.”

“We’re looking at this not only now, but in the future, particularly with climate change,” he said.

As an example of how much habitat some of the large mammals need, he said a population of 25 breeding female black bears needs 150,000 acres of habitat that is not developed or crossed by major roads. The largest open area in Vermont that is not developed is 120,000 acres, he said.

cap:

Bob Hawk stands near a small brook where he has seen lots of signs of wildlife in Lowell. In the background is Hazen’s Notch. Photo by Bethany M. Dunbar