

# Species Benefit From a Connected Landscape

By Gil Livingston, President

Adam Kahne in his book *Solving Tough Problems* explains that difficult problems are complex in three ways: 1) often the cause and effect are far apart in space and time, and therefore hard to grasp from first-hand experience; 2) the problems unfold in unfamiliar and unpredictable ways; and 3) the people involved see things very differently, so problems become polarized and stuck.

Land conservation in an era of climate change is challenged by these complexities, but the "Staying Connected" initiative, a conspiracy of goodwill among the region's leading conservation organizations, is attacking them in creative ways.

A number of realities lie at the foundation of Staying Connected.

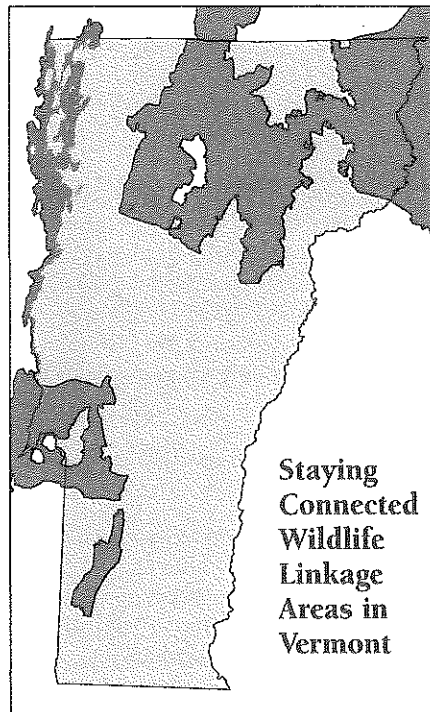
First, the future of wildlife in Vermont is tied to the health of forests across northern New York, New England, and adjacent southern Quebec.

Second, wildlife depends on large blocks of forest across the region, together with forested corridors connecting these larger blocks.

Third, our north woods are threatened with fragmentation: with our proximity to large population centers comes new roads and scattered development in the forest interior, which can create islands of disconnected forest habitat.

Staying Connected also recognizes the economic impacts of forest fragmentation: the loss of forest-products jobs and the loss of access for hikers, skiers, and snowmobilers that drive our recreation economy. Regional conservation strategies are necessary if we are to protect our wildlife heritage.

So exactly what does Staying Connected do? Five important habitat linkage areas in Vermont have been identified (see map). Within those areas, resources are focused on providing technical assistance, identifying and protecting highway crossings, permanent



land conservation, and conservation science to support all of these activities.

There are 20 organizational partners in Staying Connected, covering New York, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine, with the "Two Countries One Forest" effort focusing on Quebec. The Nature Conservancy of Vermont, the Trust for Public Land, the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife, and VLT are the lead conservation entities working in Vermont.

Over the last three years, VLT has protected 31 parcels within Staying Connected areas. A total of 5,300 acres have been conserved through easement donations from generous landowners. Staying Connected has helped cover the costs incurred in completing these easement gifts, and has supported our outreach to landowners.

This work aligns with VLT's organizational objectives. While our primary focus is on land with strong connections to people, our Trustees also direct our resources to water quality

improvement, climate change abatement, and habitat protection in the context of protecting working farms and forestland. Staying Connected goals do not require "preserve" conditions, so sustainable forest management is compatible with protecting linkages.

At the heart of the Staying Connected story are landowners who know personally the importance of their land to the state's natural heritage. For example, in Tinmouth, within the Adirondacks-Green Mountains linkage area, Sue and Bob Lloyd and their family, their friend Adam Guettel, and his sister Kim Beaty donated conservation easements on adjoining land. Not only did their efforts protect important habitat, but they contributed to a larger, 965-acre protection effort centered on conserving the 200-year-old Gilmore Farm.

To the north, County Forester and former VLT Board Chair Nancy Patch and her husband, Kevin Conneeley, joined their Enosburgh neighbors, the White and Rose families to conserve more than 500 acres in the Northern Greens linkage area. Nancy also helped create a forestland protection effort in her neighborhood known as Cold Hollow to Canada.

What species benefit from the targeted Staying Connected strategies? Black bear, ruffed grouse, American woodcock, northern river otter, bobcat, several species of warbler to name a few. Vermont's Department of Fish & Wildlife has identified "Species of Greatest Conservation Need," those whose populations could decline without attention. While full inventories have not been conducted, nine of the 41 State priority species are known to frequent one or more of the parcels VLT has conserved.

Generous landowners, solid science, strategically deployed capital, strong partnerships, and talented staff: these descriptors explain VLT's success across Vermont and they are the key ingredients of Staying Connected.

