

PLANNING

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SAVING HABITAT LINKS

TWO DEER saunter along a river bank and cross under a bridge carrying Vermont's busiest interstate highway. Click. A bobcat chases a squirrel. Click. The 40 game cameras that line Interstate 89 as it passes through the small towns of Waterbury, Duxbury, and Bolton, Vermont, are part of Staying Connected, an initiative to link wildlife habitat across that state as well as Maine, New Hampshire, upstate New York, and four Canadian provinces.

The initiative brings together more than 20 partners, including state agencies and conservation organizations such as The Nature Conservancy. It aims, first, to identify

potential wildlife passages between large blocks of less developed land, and then to create and protect those passages.

To find such linkages, the game cameras, along with a survey of animal tracks, are providing on-the-ground data about



A game camera snapped a photo of a moose attempting to cross a highway. Such photos inform efforts, like this engineered grassy path along a river, that facilitate safe passage.



the location of the best wildlife habitats near the interstate and where animals may be trying to cross. The \$183,000 cost of the project mostly came from mitigation funds from a federal highway project, says Jens Hawkins-Hilke, a Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department biologist and a Staying Connected regional coordinator.

Data from the study will be used by state transportation and wildlife planners to plan for wildlife passages and implement other measures that help animals stay connected to the habitat they need to survive environmental pressures like development and climate change.

While Staying Connected has thrived over the past five years on state-level, interagency cooperation, it hopes to work more on the municipal level, particularly with land-use planners, says Jamey Fidel, general counsel and Forest and Wildlife Program director of the Vermont Natural Resources Council, a project partner. Land-use planning is an important tool for the group to use along with mitigation strategies, like widening a culvert under a roadway for wildlife passage, he says, because it can prevent important habitats from being severed in the first place.

Staying Connected reaches out to rural communities with various resources, including model guidelines that can be put into local plans. Much of the effort is aimed at the nonprofessionals on planning commissions. One project partner, the Wildlife Conservation Society's Adirondack Program, distributes an illustrated brochure introducing planning concepts such as cluster development to help local commissions conserve wildlife habitat.

The combination of scientific data collected click by click and planning resources is working in places like Enosburgh, Vermont (pop. 2,781), which is playing a vital role in connecting wildlife in the U.S. and Canada. Says Nancy Martin, member of a local conservation group, "Our town plan now has a conservation overlay because of Staying Connected's work."

—Madeline Bodin

Bodin is a freelance writer specializing in wildlife conservation.