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Effort to Protect Wildlife Corridors Launched

Thursday, 05/13/10 12:45pm

John Dillon



VPR/John Dillon

(Host) We're all familiar with the yellow deer or moose crossing signs that dot our highways. They're a reminder that in Vermont we share the landscape with our wild neighbors, the moose, bear, fox and other creatures that call this region home.

Many of these animals need room to move, to find food and mates. But roads and development have fragmented the habitat networks that connect the Green Mountains, the Adirondacks and northern Canada.

Scientists and environmental groups have launched a four-state effort to identify and protect key wildlife corridors. They're trying to get the public to look beyond the road signs and think about wildlife movement on a much bigger scale.

VPR's John Dillon recently climbed aboard a small plane to get a hawk's-eye view of the project.

(Pilot) "Clear!"

(Dillon) To really see the connections -- and the disruptions -- between large blocks of habitat, it helps to gain a little altitude.

(Pilot to tower) "Rutland traffic: Skyline, departing runway one."



(Dillon) We take off on a clear, early spring day from Rutland Airport. The tops of the mountains are white from a recent snowstorm, but the first flush of green is moving up the hillsides.

From this vantage point, there are no property lines or town boundaries, just a patchwork of woods, fields, and valleys that define areas for wildlife movement. Also visible are the obstacles - the highways, the lakes, even a prison complex in New York - that stand in the way of animals traveling from the Adirondacks to the Green Mountains.

(Keller) "Where do we want to head right now?"

(Marangelo) "I would say head toward the center of Brandon."

Keller: "OK. That's in front of me there. Right."

(Dillon) Pilot Bob Keller is a volunteer with LightHawk, a non-profit group that helps environmentalists gather information from the air. He swings his Cessna 182 north toward the Otter Creek. Paul Marangelo - a conservation ecologist with The Nature Conservancy - scans the valley below. He's matching what he can see from the air with what his computer models and maps have shown are critical places for wildlife to move.

(Marangelo) "Definitely swing into the east here, that would be great, and we can kind of look down into the Route 7 valley because we'll be approaching one of the areas that is one of the highest priority areas that we want to focus on."

(Dillon) From an ecological perspective, the 80 million acres that stretches from the Tug Hill plateau in central New York all the way to eastern Canada is just one big northern forest.

The Green Mountains and the Adirondacks hold some of the largest unbroken blocks in this bio-region. But for creatures to move back and forth, they need stepping stones of quality habitat in between. Sometimes it doesn't take much. A stream valley or even a hedgerow can provide the needed cover. Marangelo points out such a spot along the Otter Creek, 2,000 feet below.

(Marangelo) "There's areas of vegetation or habitat where you can see where conceivably an animal might be able to move through. The narrower the valley, the more likely it is that wildlife is going to find a good place to move around in."

(Dillon) Rutland County and the New York side of the Champlain

Valley have many critical wildlife corridors. But actually, Marangelo says, the word "corridor" can be misleading. It's not that simple in nature, he says.

(Marangelo) "Corridors' is kind of a strange term to think about, because it really suggests this discreet area with lines on either side. And really, we're really looking at this more from the perspective of a network of habitats, a network of forest lands and patches of habitats and places that animals can move through."

(Dillon) The goal is "landscape connectivity." The idea is that core habitat areas should be linked to allow animals enough room to range and to provide genetic diversity within species.

The four-state effort to identify existing wildlife networks involves state wildlife agencies, highway departments, and about 20 environmental groups.

Monica Erhart works as a linkage coordinator in Addison and Rutland counties. Erhart explains that this is a different kind of conservation effort, one that's focused less on regulation or buying land outright for preservation. Instead, she works with the public on education, community outreach and possible protection.

(Erhart) "In some cases it might be working with the planning commission to just think about the landscape in their town and see if they would like to do anything to plan around it. Some cases, too, it's just working with groups of landowners who might like to manage their land in an appropriate way for wildlife and just need to know how."

(Dillon) A black bear can roam 40 miles or more in a season, while smaller creatures like fishers can range three or four miles in a day. Roads like Route 7 can fragment their habitat. But as we bank back over Brandon, one place stands out like a green oasis near the busy highway.

It's a 400-acre conserved forest called Hawk Hill adjacent to Otter Valley Union High School.

(Marangelo Erhart) "It's a really valuable chunk of woodland in a really strategic location. Erhart: If you can imagine anything trying to cross Route 7 where there are few places to cross, it goes right into that Hawk Hill area so it provides a really good block, a patch of habitat."

(Pilot) "Yes, this is three-niner Tango, looks like we're going to roll all the way to the end." Plane engine slows..

The sound of walking in the woods

(Dillon) The view from the air gives the big picture of the barriers and bottlenecks to wildlife movement. Students



VPR/John Dillon

at Otter Valley Union High School in Brandon have the close-up perspective. They've hiked Hawk Hill through the mud and the snow, and they know it well.

(Harley Fjeld) " So we have rich soil, we have hardwood trees, we have maples, oaks, beech..."



VPR/John Dillon

Students with the Moosalamoo Center

(Dillon) Senior Harley Fjeld and a half dozen other students use the 400 acre forest as a living classroom.

(Fjeld) "The great thing about Hawk Hill is that you have so much biodiversity within the landscape, so we have this right here, we have this rich northern hardwood, but then a few yards over we'll have the hemlock forest."

(Dillon) The students are part of the Moosalamoo Center, a program dedicated to outdoor education.

The name is said to come from an Abenaki word meaning someone who follows moose, an appropriate name as it turns out.

The students have seen firsthand that Hawk Hill is a key, interlocking piece of the habitat network in Rutland County. Ninth grader Kiefer Metcalfe explains.

(Metcalfe) "One of the best examples that we've seen so far of this being prime corridor.. is that we have found moose tracks, two sets of moose tracks. One was, well, way over there and the other one was around here. And moose, this is way too low territory for them. So they're just passing through to another mountain range."

(Dillon) Hawk Hill is also home to mink, fisher, bobcat, coyotes, fox and a host of other species. Harley Fjeld says the students have learned to read the tracks and tell their stories.

(Fjeld) "A few of us were tracking like - we were following different tracks, and eventually they led together and two animals had been sniffing each other out. And another time we found a little tussle between - we thought it was a gray fox and a coyote, or another gray fox. Josh, do you remember what that was?"

(Dillon) Josh Hardt is the outdoor education coordinator for the Moosalamoo Center. He makes the point that habitat conservation is about preserving human communities as well as wildlife.

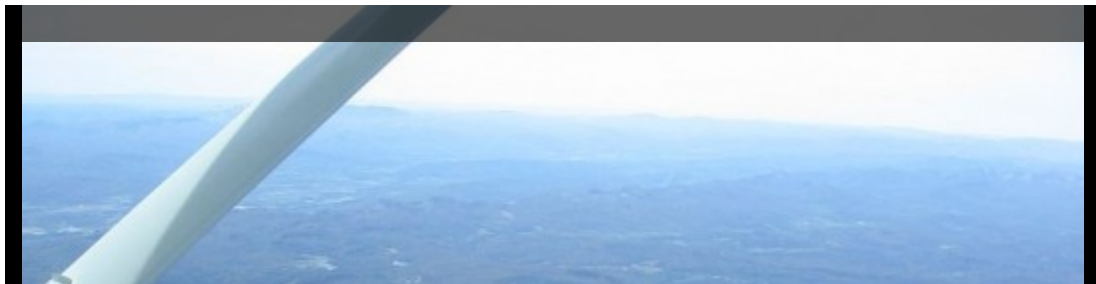
(Hardt) "I think we all to some degree value the rural nature of the state and the tradition and heritage that go along with that. And in some ways I think we're really touting the preservation of our heritage and the values of our state as well so we don't become the proverbial anywhere America."

(Dillon) The students say they hope to take their knowledge of the natural world beyond Hawk Hill. In a sense, they're all ambassadors for the habitat linkage project. Here's seventeen year old Andrew Fusco:

(Fusco) "I believe that many more would like to be educated on the subject. And we all feel very privileged to be doing our part, and to be connected on kind of the large picture to preserve the integrity of something that we hold very dear to us."

(Dillon) Fusco and the other students say that a major lesson of the linkage project is that the habitat we share needs people for protection.

For VPR News, I'm John Dillon in Brandon.





Tags

[wildlife habitat](#) [moosalamoo center](#)

VPR News

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Friday, 05/14/10 7:34am

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NPR News

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Friday, 05/14/10 9:20am

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