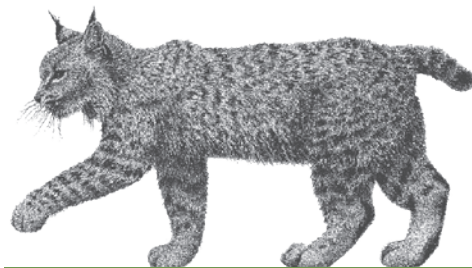


SPRING 2020

Harris Hearsay

News of the Harris Center and Our Work in the Community



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Our Mission

A donor-supported nonprofit organization, the Harris Center for Conservation Education is dedicated to promoting understanding and respect for our natural environment through education of all ages, direct protection and exemplary stewardship of the region's natural resources, conservation research, and programs that encourage active participation in the great outdoors.

◀ **50th Anniversary merchandise can be purchased by phone and shipped to you!**

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◀ **A Blue-headed Vireo, newly returned from its southeastern wintering grounds, welcomes spring from its perch in a flowering red maple.**

photo: Meade Cadot

Coming into the Peace of Wild Things

by Susie Spikol, Community Programs Director and Teacher-Naturalist

It's early morning and we're standing on a trail near the Contoocook River.

We have our hands on our bellies as we breathe in. The air smells like sunshine and damp fallen leaves. We stand without talking, letting the roar of the cascading river surround us. I turn towards my group and see children, parents, and teachers, all with their eyes closed, their faces turned towards the sun.

For the past few years, I've been meeting Bennington's Pierce School students for before-school hikes on a nearby trail. Parents come too, if they can, as well as teachers and the town's conservation commission members. This is a choice for the students, a free opportunity to go hiking before school starts. Like most of the elementary schools in my region, Pierce School is small. Only 70 students, from kindergarten through 4th grade, attend. On any given day, about half of them show up for these morning walks.

Each morning, this is our first stop, breathing in the falling water as it plunges and dives around the granite rocks. It marks the beginning of something different — a new, wilder way to start the day. We need this. I'm convinced that we need this down to our very core, in our hearts, in our minds, in our bodies. We're all thirsty for a chance to move through untamed terrain and experience what the natural world has to offer.

I watch these children, whose lives are complicated and busy, show up an hour before school starts. Some look so weary when they arrive, I wonder if they'll have enough energy for our adventure, while others are racing around the parking area, their energy barely contained. I work with these students in their classrooms and see how hard a day can be for them. There's a lot of work to do at this school — at all of the schools I visit — around managing the emotions of growing up in today's fast-paced world. Each child comes with their own stories.

But out on the trail, I see these children unfold and open like spring flowers. There's an exuberance to our walk. We try to leave our worries at the start of the trail by the rushing water, letting the river carry them far away from us, at least for the moment. We shake off our road dust and remember what it feels like to be in our bodies on a brand new morning. We skip and jump, climb rocks and stone walls, navigate around fallen trees, and try to balance on the old railroad ties that mark the trail. Each week we go a bit further, taking new trails and paths. Sometimes we even bushwhack into uncharted land or run on the abandoned railroad like we're trains bringing wood pulp to the town's paper mill.

But we stop too, stilling our bodies and our voices. We listen to the birds, the wind in the pines, the buzz of cicadas, the rush of the water and our own breath. We spend time among the trees, letting our fingers run across the rough bark of the eastern hemlock or the

smooth, half-eaten shell of an acorn. We bend low to look at mushrooms and salamanders, and tilt our heads back to watch the clouds through the highest branches. I see teachers and parents



lean in to smell a flower or cheer when we spot an eagle circling above us. We're on wild time, and it's filling all of us up with hope.

We leave different than when we first arrived. We see the signs in the children, in their easy laughter and in the relaxed way they meander back towards the school. We've begun to survey the students before and after the walk on how they feel. The survey is simple, with children just taking a moment to self-reflect on their emotional state and then checking a corresponding box. Our surveys consistently show that, for the majority of students, their emotional state changes for the positive after our forest walks.

We know our surveys means nothing scientifically, that our sample size is too small, but we don't care. What we do know — what we feel in our hearts — is that our morning rambles make for better days, not just for our students but for ourselves as parents, teachers, community members, and caregivers.

One morning on the walk back, I feel the little hand of a kindergartener slide into mine. With his other hand, he gives me an oak leaf filled with holes and says, "Look at this. When you hold it up to the sky, you can see the sun through it. It's my best find today." I look at the leaf and see a rosy-cheeked little boy smiling back at me through the holes, and I think: *this* is my best find of the day. 🍂



The Harris Center has canceled or postponed all in-person programs and events until further notice due to the pandemic, but Susie and all of our teacher-naturalists are looking forward to the time when programs like the one featured in this story can resume. For updates on what we're doing in response to COVID-19, please visit harriscenter.org.

LAND CONSERVATION NEWS

948 Acres Protected in Antrim and Harrisville

by Eric Masterson, Land Program Manager

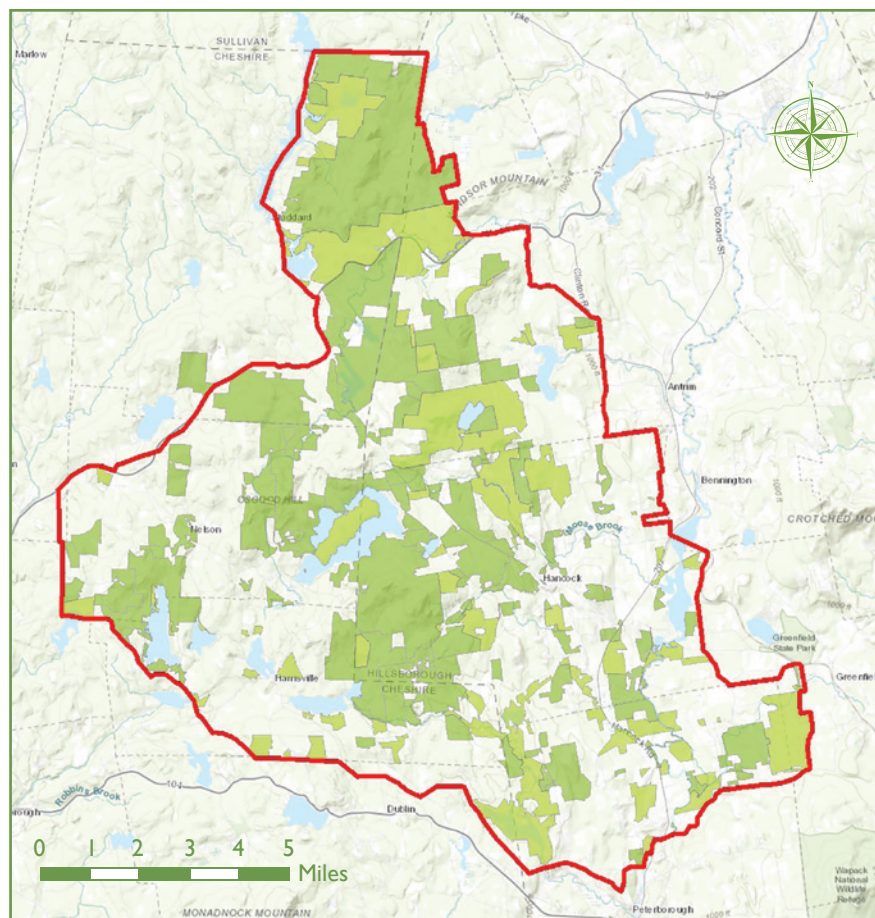
December and January seem so removed from our current situation, but it is worth looking back to celebrate a wonderfully productive time for land conservation at the Harris Center. In those two months alone, we completed six conservation easements and a land purchase, for a total of 948 acres of newly protected land.

The bulk of this activity was in Antrim, with five of the easements protecting a large swath of Bald Basin — a relatively unfragmented block of forested ridgelines to the west and northwest of Gregg Lake and to the north of Bald Mountain — from further development beyond the Antrim Wind Energy facility. This area has long been a conservation priority for the region.

In addition, George and Michelle Caughey donated a conservation easement on a forested parcel abutting Gregg Lake, also in Antrim. The 58-acre property, which has not been logged in 80 years, contains approximately 2,000 feet of Gregg Lake shoreline. It was conserved for the express purpose of protecting the scenic beauty of the lake and associated wildlife habitat. Although the easement was donated to the Harris Center, it was truly a gift for all who love Gregg Lake!



▲ **Protecting Gregg Lake** A summer view from the newly conserved Caughey Forest, which contains 2,000 feet of shoreline along Gregg Lake in Antrim. photo: George Caughey



Finally, thanks to generous support from the Friends of the SuperSanctuary, the Harris Center purchased 41 acres at the corner of Hancock Road and Route 137 in East Harrisville. The mostly forested parcel abuts Harris Center-conserved land on its western and northern boundaries, and contains 2,250 feet of road frontage on Route 137. We have been protecting land in this area since the early 1990s, through a deliberate series of land acquisitions and conservation easements. As a result, this new project adds directly to 6,000 acres of contiguous conserved land in Harrisville, Hancock, and Nelson.

All of the projects build on our existing network of conserved lands, helping to ensure abundant wildlife habitat and a wealth of wonderful outdoor recreation opportunities in the Monadnock Region, now and into the future. As of early 2020, the Harris Center has now protected more than 24,000 acres of land — and that's cause for celebration, even (and perhaps especially) in these challenging times. 🌲

◀ **A Conservation Milestone** The Harris Center has now directly protected more than 24,000 acres within our focus area (outlined in red), with an additional 12,000 acres protected by partner organizations.

SPRING IS NOT CANCELED

by Brett Amy Thelen, Science Director

I don't need to tell you that we are living in an extraordinary time. Every day, new closures or cancellations are announced, new cases of COVID-19 suspected or discovered. We're doing what we must to care for ourselves and our community, but the prospect of isolation or, worse, illness weighs heavy.

Like many of us, I prepared for the possibility of quarantine by stocking up on canned goods and coffee at the co-op just before the stay-at-home order was announced. Pushing my grocery cart through crowded aisles and past empty shelves, I saw one weary, worried face after another. I got the sense that all of us, shoppers and cashiers alike, were just trying to hold it together — and barely succeeding.

The other evening, desperate for a break from the anxiety and chaos and uncertainty, I went for a walk after work. The first half-hour, my mind was swirling with questions and to-do lists and contingency plans and niggling fears about whether I'd

washed my hands often enough or long enough that day.

Then, I was drawn out of my dismal reverie by the *peenting* and twittering of two woodcocks, engaged in competing courtship displays. I'd never seen or heard woodcocks

so close to my home before, and it stopped me in my tracks. Wild creatures, carrying on with their wild lives, oblivious to our human dramas. The slow, grand unfurling of spring.

My friend Sam Jaffe — educator, photographer, and chief caterpillar wrangler for The Caterpillar Lab in Marlborough — saw it too:

*As businesses close, the first Red-Winged Blackbirds and Eastern Phoebes arrive to stake out nesting territories. As the CDC makes its recommendations, the red maple buds swell and the first spring caterpillars emerge to feed. As the toilet paper aisles sit empty at supermarkets, the great amphibian migrations continue.... We are just around the corner from the first tent caterpillars hatching, from dozens of species of moths at our lights, from viceroy butterfly caterpillars eating willow buds, from so much life. Many programs and events may have been canceled, but **spring is not canceled.***

Every day, new birds are returning. On rainy nights, spotted salamanders and wood frogs are moving toward their breeding

pools with great determination. In a few weeks, bloodroot and coltsfoot and trout lilies will appear. Fiddleheads will uncoil. With or without us, the natural world is reawakening.

It comforts me to know that, even though our own daily rhythms have been deeply disrupted, nature's rhythms endure.

Now, more than ever, we need time in nature — what poet Wendell Berry called “the peace of wild things.” “When despair for the world grows in me,” he wrote, “and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.... For a time, I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.”

Thankfully, being outside is in keeping with the principles of social distancing, as long as you take certain precautions. (See the inset on the next page for how to keep yourself, and others, healthy on the trail while social distancing is required.)

So, sit in the garden and feel the warmth of the sun on your skin. Head to your nearest wetland after dark and immerse yourself in the deafening roar of love-struck peepers. Listen for owls. Search for spring wildflowers.

As ecologists and educators, we often talk of what people can do to sustain the natural world, but it's also important to remember how the natural world sustains *us*. It calms us, centers us, grounds us. It provides essential respite from the frenzied fusillade that is the 24-hour news cycle.

We are exceptionally fortunate to live in a place with a strong commitment to land protection and to ensuring that the public has access to this open space. Now is the perfect time to discover it all. You could hike a different Monadnock Region trail every day until the need for self-isolation has passed, and not repeat yourself once. Like many organizations, the Harris Center is canceling in-person programs and events for a while, but our trails and grounds remain open, and we hope you'll use them.

Friends, if you can get outside during the days and weeks to come — whether to a Harris Center trail, one of the many other wonderful conservation lands in our neck of the woods, or even just your own backyard — do it. It helps. ☘

A version of this essay first appeared in the Monadnock Ledger-Transcript on March 24, 2020.



▲ **Bloodroot** photo: Brett Amy Thelen



▲ **Woodcock** photo: Polly Pattison

5. Don't take risks. Search and rescue efforts put first responders at risk of exposure, and can divert medical attention away from those who need it most. Save your epic backcountry adventures for another day, and use an abundance of caution with regard to weather, terrain, and trip planning.

Fond Farewells & Warm Welcomes

by Jeremy Wilson, Director

Diana Jacobs has retired after more than 14 years with us. If you've visited the Harris Center in the last decade, there's a good chance you were greeted by Diana's warm smile in the front office. Over the years, she's done a dizzying array of diverse work for the Harris Center — from editing our calendar of events to coordinating trailwork and building rentals to managing our annual fundraising efforts. Diana came to the Harris Center after teaching and farming careers in Harrisville, during which she raised two daughters in the great outdoors (and off the grid). We'll miss Diana's deep knowledge about the Harris Center, her love of the natural world, and her lifelong familiarity with the Monadnock Region. At her retirement party, it was so much fun to learn about her role as an undercover investigator in the Dublin Bypass battle and what it was like working at the Harrisville Mills when she was in college. We wish



her all the best for her well-deserved retirement in her beautiful home in Hancock. 🐾

Miles Stahmann joins us as our new Office Manager. Before coming to the Harris Center, Miles served in the Peace Corps in Ecuador, where he worked with cocoa farmers from 2006 to 2008. He was inspired by what he saw and, after earning his MBA from Babson College, founded a chocolate company in Boston. After selling the chocolate business in 2016, Miles traveled with his wife Leah to Patagonia, lobster fished in Maine, and — to our great fortune — ended up in Hancock. The next time you call or visit the Harris Center, be sure to give Miles a very warm welcome! 🐾



Lodge Fever by John Benjamin, Teacher-Naturalist



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You can help ensure a grand future for the Monadnock Region by naming the Harris Center as a beneficiary in your will or estate plan through our planned giving program, Bobcats Forever Legacy Society. Anyone can make a bequest, and no amount is too small. For more information, contact Jeremy Wilson at (603) 525-3394 or wilson@harriscenter.org.