

Harris Hearsay

News of the Harris Center and Our Work in the Community

The Harris Center connects people to the natural world through land protection, education of all ages, conservation research, and programs that encourage active participation in the great outdoors.

A Land Well Loved, A Legacy Preserved

by Eric Masterson, Land Program Manager

The Harris Center closed on the Lessey conservation easement on August 5, 2025, protecting 110 acres of iconic field and forest on Brimstone Corner Road, Antrim Road, and Shady Lane in Hancock. Though the details of the easement and deed language were negotiated in a matter of months and the closing itself took less than an hour, this particular cake took 30 years to bake. Much of the credit goes to Bruce Hedin, who has been the property's custodian since 1994.

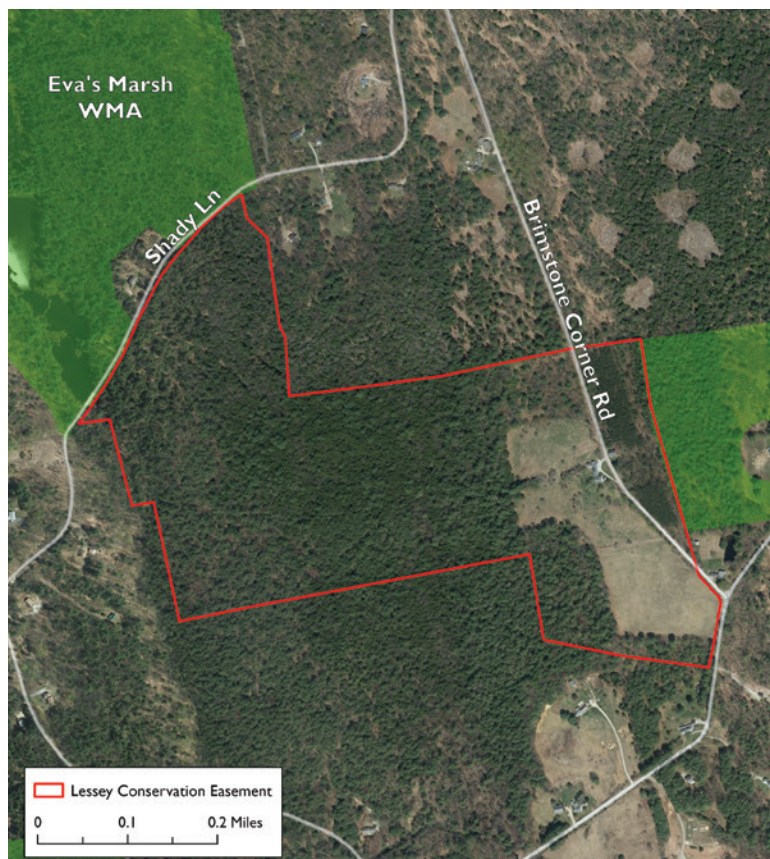
While General Samuel Lessey was alive, care of the land was never in doubt. Because he had no plans to develop the property, he didn't see the need for a conservation easement during his lifetime. Still, he added a provision to his will ensuring the land would be conserved after his death. We may never know exactly what prompted this cautious man to finally commit to the permanence of a conservation easement, but over his 99 years — many of them spent in Hancock — he must have recognized that the tide of development was steadily rising. Bruce's vital contribution was to connect him with the one tool that could hold back that tide, at least on Brimstone Corner Road.

The easement protects 1,100 feet of Priest Brook, a tributary of Moose Brook, and almost a mile of road frontage. It also connects the Bryan conservation easement to Eva's Marsh, fulfilling a key Harris Center objective of assembling a connected network of conserved land for wildlife and people. The easement includes a generous 16-acre exclusion area around the house to ensure there is ample space for future owners to adapt the property to their needs, and both commercial agriculture and commercial forestry are permitted across the entire property.

Please join Harris Center staff in extending our appreciation to both General Lessey and Bruce Hedin for this incredibly generous gift to people and wildlife alike. 🐾



▲ Thanks to General Samuel Lessey and Bruce Hedin, 110 acres of field and forest have been conserved in Hancock.





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Summer Campers Spread Their Wings



In 2025, the Harris Center welcomed **198 campers** from **139 families** for another season of summer adventures. From hiking Mount Skatutakee and canoeing Lake Nubanusit to playing games and building shelters, camp offers both fun and essential social-emotional growth. “Children have a chance to spread their wings and make new friends from outside their school community, while building connections with camp counselors and our younger counselors in training,” says teacher-naturalist Susie Spikol. “There’s a different freedom in summer camp than in school. They can howl like coyotes, catch frogs with their bare hands, and move their body through the natural world.”

illustration © rawpixel

WALKING EVERY DAY

by Brett Amy Thelen,
Science Director

I am on a streak — a 310-day step streak, that is. Which is to say I have walked at least 10,000 steps every day for the last 310 days. I don't belong to a gym and I haven't set foot on a treadmill since The Unfortunate Treadmill Incident of 1993 (don't ask), so this also means that I have spent time outside every day for 310 days in a row. I didn't set out with this goal in mind; a few weeks in, I just noticed that I hadn't missed a day and decided to keep going.

For me, 10,000 steps is somewhere between 60 and 90 minutes of walking, and just over four miles. Sometimes this takes the form of one long walk. Other days, I split it up, a short stretch at lunch followed by a sunset stroll or after-dark amble.

Often, I start out with my head a tangle of to-do lists, anxieties, and ruminations. Eventually, the knot loosens, and the worries of the day fade into the curl of the wind. As the streak continues, I'm finding that it takes less and less time for my mind to quiet, as if my body has learned to recognize that this is the letting-go part of the day.

In winter, night comes early and the woodstove has its pull. Summer brings heat advisories, bugs, thunderstorms, bugs, and air so heavy you could chew it. The streak has kept me going even when darkness or deer flies might otherwise favor indoor pursuits.



Though the nature of my daily strolls has changed with the seasons, one thing has stayed the same: I have never regretted going for a walk, even when — perhaps especially when — it's the last thing I feel like doing. Time and again, those turn out to be the most memorable walks of all.

One night in January, I thought maybe it was time to end the streak. I had gotten home late, exhausted from back-to-back-to-back meetings, and still needed 8,000 steps. I wanted nothing more than to sink into bed and call it a day. Begrudgingly, I pushed myself out the door and into the cold, half-convinced I'd turn around at any moment.

Then, the clouds thinned to reveal the full Wolf Moon, with golden Mars dangling beneath it like a charm. In the moonlight, the pines cast long shadows across the road. A moon-bright meadow gleamed in the distance. So, I kept going.

I was on a path popular with dogwalkers, but afternoon squalls had just dropped an inch of fresh snow, and no one had

walked it since. Well, almost no one. Fifteen feet down the trail, I discovered hours-old otter tracks, bounding and sliding along the edge of an icy brook.

And that is how I found myself following in the footsteps of otters under the light of the Wolf Moon. If I had stayed inside, I would have missed it all.



In June, the rain kept coming, testing my resolve. The couch beckoned. Grumbling, I tugged on my raincoat, opened the door, and was instantly greeted by a painted turtle evaluating our yard as a potential nest site. Two minutes later, just across the street, I found a snapping turtle laying eggs in my neighbor's garden. Until I stepped outside, I'd had no idea either one of them was there.

One night in July, as if to underscore the point, I ended a long, muggy, buggy day 1,000 steps short of my goal. It was already 10 p.m. I may or may not have grouched to my husband, "I'm going out for my stupid walk now." I calculated exactly how far I needed to go to achieve 10,000 steps and was determined to walk only that distance before heading home to wash off the bug spray. But the air had finally cooled and the fireflies were blinking their magical Morse code, and so I decided to stroll just a little further. Rounding a bend in the road, my flashlight caught a glimpse of eyeshine. A bobcat, wiggling her tail, with a bobkitten bouncing behind.

Lesson learned (and re-learned): when in doubt, just go outside.

Studies have shown that walking — and, more broadly, time spent outdoors — boosts your heart health and immune function, improves concentration and problem-solving abilities, and leads to better sleep. A few years ago, Dr. Virginia Sturm, professor of neurology and psychiatry at UC San Francisco, and Dr. Dacher Keltner, professor of psychology at UC Berkeley, took a deeper look at how walking outside can also support

emotional wellbeing through a practice they call “awe-walking.”

For their study, Sturm and Keltner enlisted 60 people over the age of 75 and asked them to take a 15-minute walk once a week for eight weeks. The participants were instructed to snap a selfie on every walk, and to answer some questions about their mood after each outing. Half of the group went for normal walks. The other half were given a special set of directions: Go somewhere new or especially beautiful. Shift your gaze between the minute (the textures and colors of a single leaf) and the vast (the pattern made by all the leaves shuffling in the wind). Engage your sense of wonder.

Over time, the people who went for these “awe walks” reported less distress, more joy, greater feelings of empathy and kindness toward others, and less pain in their bodies. The more they practiced seeking awe on their weekly walks, the deeper that awe became.

Even more intriguing, the “self” began to take up a smaller portion of each selfie for the awe-walkers, a sign that they were focusing more on the world around them than on themselves.

I’m mindful, always, that walking is not possible or enjoyable for everyone, and although Keltner and his colleagues did not assess the impacts of awe-sitting or awe-birding or awe-listening, I imagine they’re much the same. In the end, it’s not so much about the walking, I think, but the attention — and taking time each day to dwell in the more-than-human world.



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I confess that I haven’t fully embraced the practice of awe-walking just yet — awe can be tough to come by when you’re running a gauntlet of pugnacious deer flies, or sidling through sideways sleet — but I’m working on it. A milkweed

blossom here. A toadlet there. And who knows what wonders await just around the bend in the road... 🐸

Versions of this essay first appeared in the Monadnock Ledger-Transcript’s “Backyard Naturalist” column on January 24, 2025 and July 29, 2025.

In the forest of the Saw-whet night *for Hillary Siener*

First the stars are nearly the
noisiest thing
their cold sparkle magnetic
impossible to ignore then
the choir of singing coyotes
next a squeal from a flying squirrel
another witness
but every now and then it comes
that other startle
the shriek of a tiny raptor
fully wrapped dense
in the finest of fluff and feathers
some minute
some without any shape only
the slenderest of strands, antennae,
finders of skittering small creatures
scurrying under and over
brittle damp fallen glory of
the season now past
the tree feeders
and these owls
whose call must signal
panic to those who cannot
escape into the air
or under the earth fast enough
tiny fleet forest folk
and these owls
almost invisible in their browns and grays
creams and ivory brilliance
their yellow eyes patient
quizzical, outraged
as the steadfast gentle giant intruders
study, record reverently
and attempt to peer into
this unfathomable universe
traveling on quiet wide soft spotted wings
while bills snap and full-furred legs
conceal talons exquisite and deadly
as magnificent as any
avian creation
known to fly.

— Polly Pattison

Polly Pattison is a poet, bird bander, and retired Harris Center teacher-naturalist. Each fall, she volunteers with the Harris Center’s saw-whet owl banding project, run by lead bander Hillary Siener, collecting data on migration trends to inform conservation efforts for this charismatic, climate-vulnerable bird of prey.



STAN SMITH: Honoring a Legacy, One Step at a Time

by Michelle Aldredge, Communications Manager



▲ The First “In the Footsteps of John Kulish” Hike in 2013

To walk with Stan Smith is to see the woods anew: not just as a landscape, but as a living source of insight, education, and connection. An avid outdoorsman who grew up hunting with his father, Stan spent a decade as an industrial engineer before transitioning to a long career teaching math at Fitchburg High School. He began volunteering with the Harris Center in 2011, monitoring his first conservation easement that same year. In 2013, he led his first *In the Footsteps of John Kulish* hike — the start of a beloved, long-running series.

Stan first heard about the Harris Center from John Kulish himself. Kulish — a trapper, teacher, and the Harris Center’s first staff naturalist — had helped lay the foundation for our outdoor education program in the early 1970s. “We were hunting,” Stan recalls. “John told me he was going to retire and that I should take his job. I was in no way qualified, except that I loved the woods.” After Kulish’s passing, Stan stopped by the Harris Center, where he met Eric Masterson, who encouraged him to get involved. That serendipitous meeting sparked nearly 15 years of volunteer service.

Alongside his friend Vic Starzynski, Stan led regular outings that retraced Kulish’s favorite hikes, often off-trail. One memorable destination was a natural cave formed by a boulder balanced atop smaller rocks — large enough to sit inside, build a fire, and marvel at a moose skeleton, likely dragged there by a bear. Friends and family often joined Stan on these hikes, including his daughter Kassia, who was able to attend the very first Kulish hike before her death from cancer in 2016.

“Stan kept the memory of those treks alive,” says former Harris Center director Meade Cadot, “particularly for younger folks who could still go, like Susie [Spikol], Denny Wheeler, Ben Haubrich, and Lee Baker.”

“The Harris Center was a place where I could share my love of the woods,” Stan explains. “I hoped to use my knowledge to help others understand the importance of conservation and preservation of the wilderness.”



▲ Vic Starzynski (left) and Stan Smith (right) in front of the natural cave.

Harris Center staffers speak fondly of Stan and his contributions to the organization. “He’s an incredibly decent guy,” explains Eric Masterson. Stan’s generosity has extended well beyond his work as a hike leader. Over the years, he’s donated rare Stoddard Glass, antique logging tools, moose antlers, and several pieces of Kulish memorabilia to the Harris Center. He and his wife, Melanie Gallo, also funded the purchase of a GRIT all-terrain wheelchair, helping make outdoor experiences more accessible to all. “I love the outdoors so much,” Stan said when asked about the donation. “I want others to be able to appreciate it too.”

“I enjoy the peacefulness of the woods,” Stan reflects. “Every step is an adventure filled with amazing discoveries: lichens, mosses, birds, animals, trees, boulders. Each season offers different sights and sounds. I believe that in my 64 years of walking, I must have stepped where no one has stepped before.”

Now living on Cape Cod, Stan continues to give back. He volunteers with the Barnstable Land Trust and teaches kids to shellfish through the Barnstable Association for Recreational Shellfishing — a group that raises money for environmental scholarships and grants. He also plays a mean golf game.

Whether walking off-trail with Harris Center hikers or teaching kids how to harvest clams, Stan Smith’s life has been defined by quiet acts of generosity — and a deep belief that the best way to care for the earth is to share its wonder with others. ➤



HARRIS CENTER
FOR CONSERVATION EDUCATION

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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, the *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.



MONADNOCK REGION

Natural History CONFERENCE 2025



November 15 at Keene State College in Keene, NH

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Join us to learn about regional wildlife, ecology, and human connections to nature. For more information and to register, visit tinyurl.com/MonadnockNaturalHistory