



# CONNECTING HABITAT AND NEIGHBORS

## COLD HOLLOW TO CANADA



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It is early spring, and the American black bear emerges from its den, famished; it's been three to four months since its last meal. The bear seeks out a wetland since the vegetation there greens up earlier than in the forest, and the grasses, sedges, and roots provide vital nutrients. As spring eases into summer, the bear pursues sustenance in many forms: fruits and berries, ants, honey, carrion, and sometimes fresh meat. Then comes fall, when a bear's fancy turns to foods with high fat content, particularly the nuts of oak and beech trees in mature forests.

Mammals such as moose, fisher, bobcats, and bears need access to varying landscapes to sustain them. A female black bear may need as much as six square miles, a male even more. Just as important as the foraging range, though, is the ability for animals to move long distances to breed. An isolated population will become inbred and less stable. Protecting diverse habitats and the connections between them is a real challenge as fragmentation — the division of land into small lots and other types of intrusions into the forest interior — increases.

Nancy Patch is a county forester with the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation and a former VLT Board member. She and her husband, Kevin Conneely, a logger, conserved 196 acres in Enosburgh this past December. Their land is primarily forested and has wetlands and vernal pools that offer diverse habitats.

"Fragmentation is probably the greatest threat to the Northeast Forest," Nancy explained. "Historically, Vermont went from 20 percent forest [around 100 years ago] back to 80 percent forest, but now it's diminishing for the first time in decades." That's due to the development of 5- to 50-acre lots. For people earning a living in the woods through logging or maple sugaring, or simply trying to enjoy the natural experiences that undisturbed land provides, fragmentation chops those opportunities into bits so small that they aren't worth pursuing.



In 2008, Nancy helped organize the Cold Hollow to Canada Forest Link Project (CHC). Named for a range in the northern Green Mountains that stretches to the Canadian border, CHC encourages land stewardship and habitat conservation in seven towns: Bakersfield, Enosburgh, Fletcher, Montgomery, Richford, Belvidere, and Waterville. The group has also formed partnerships with organizations in Quebec.



The stakes are even higher now. “With climate change, it is especially important to protect large blocks of forestland and a well-connected natural landscape that facilitates movement of animals,” said VLT’s Liz Thompson, a conservation biologist. “Protecting this forest will help keep carbon on the ground instead of in the atmosphere, and will give nature the greatest chance of adapting to the rapid changes.”

In partnership with CHC, VLT has been reaching out to landowners in the seven towns. Two of Nancy and Kevin’s neighbors also donated conservation easements to VLT this year. Stuart, Matilda, and Allison White conserved 193 acres, and Lew and

Claudia Rose conserved 116 acres. And in nearby Fletcher, George and Carol Little donated an easement on 85 acres. The outreach work is spreading the news about the importance of the land to wildlife. “It was serendipitous, really; we didn’t know about the wildlife corridor,” said Carol Little. “But that made us feel good. [Ours is] not a huge piece of property, but it’s strategically placed.”



The CHC region is located in an area that is a focus of Staying Connected, a partnership of 21 organizations protecting habitat connections in northern New England and New York. The initiative has identified five areas in Vermont that are particularly important to wildlife. In the past three years, VLT has conserved 5,300 acres in these areas. Staying Connected, which is funded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Freeman Foundation, helped defray some of the costs of conservation for Nancy, Kevin, the Littles, Whites, and Roses.

**Stuart White, Lew Rose, Claudia Rose, Kevin Conneely, and Nancy Patch (clockwise from front).**



The focus on this land by conservationists mirrors the attention landowners have given to their forests over the years. The Whites bought their property in 1968, yet they never built on it, preferring to camp when they visit from Norwich. “We’ve never wanted to develop it,” said Stuart. The neighbors gather data about animals’ use of the land and monitor the health of their populations. “We go and see what has changed, what animals are coming through,” said Lew Rose, who has owned his property since 1995. They have learned where to look for tracks and how to identify markings on trees. “We’re boots on the ground. We get some pretty good data that can be used, hopefully, by the community to make decisions down the road.”

Nancy notes that there’s a lot of interest in conservation. “It’s not something that can be rushed,” she added. “It depends on people’s circumstances. But I must say, I think conservation is the best hope for protecting the Northern Forest.”