

ACFC Work Group Meeting, 4/10/24, Town Center

**ACFC Members: Brad Elliott, Chase Rosenberg. Member of the Public: Sam Pratt
For VT Fish & Wildlife: Andrea Shortsleeve, Private Lands Biologist**

We began by giving Andrea an overview of our responsibilities under the Richmond Town Plan and ACF Conservation Easement for protecting wildlife along with overall ecological diversity and health in the ACF. Andrea described the State's move from taking a species-by-species approach to wildlife and habitat management to a focus on safeguarding and fostering natural communities that are important to wide ranges of wildlife.

Andrea asked what kinds of resources we had to devote to the effort – in particular those of staff, volunteer energy and funding. We reported that we were light on staff, could presumably tap into the Town's Conservation Reserve Fund, and expected that there could be considerable volunteer interest in monitoring and managing wildlife and programs aimed at maintaining habitat integrity.

Andrea mentioned that condensing trails to one area of the forest will have less of a detrimental impact on wildlife than having trails spread out across the forest. She also mentioned (later on) that trails have a greater impact on wildlife than dispersed use.

Andrea mentioned that while well-intentioned, the plan we had created was overly ambitious and not likely to be successful. Measuring actual trail impacts on wildlife would be problematic without credible benchmarking metrics and regular monitoring. Because of the limited resources available to us, she recommended managing the ACF to protect and enhance features especially important to wildlife. She named the forest's significant natural communities, ridgelines, connectivity corridors, riparian areas and vernal pools. She also mentioned the importance of focusing on habitat for smaller animals, rather than focusing on a few keystone species like bear, bobcat, moose, etc.

Andrea noted how Hinesburg has divided its Town Forest into zones with different types of activity allowed corresponding to their importance to ecological values. To further promote conservation, Andrea suggested encouraging forest visitors to document sightings of wildlife on apps like eBird and iNaturalist. Over time the public would gain a greater awareness of the variety of wildlife living in the forest.

Training could be offered to help the public improve their observational and recording skills. Automated traffic counters could provide numerical information on trail usage and changes over time.

Andrea noted that ACF has a high population of deer, resulting in over-browsing which is detrimental to the forest as certain species are not able to thrive. This eliminates smaller trees, which can result in a missing piece of the understory. While removing needed cover for other species, including birds, it also gives a foothold to invasive species.

We discussed how deer hunting could be encouraged as one way to help reduce the impacts of over-browsing. Closing the forest to other types of recreation during rifle and archery seasons would make hunters feel welcome while improving public safety in general. (This is practiced in the Hinesburg Town Forest.) Archery season is important because it's the only time does can be hunted, which has a greater impact on the deer population. Keeping the forest hospitable to all predators, human and otherwise, was also seen as helping. Doing repeated deer browse studies is something measurable that we could foreseeably study as a benchmark for forest health.

Andrea singled out two of ACF's natural communities – Red Oak-Northern Hardwood and Hemlock-Northern Hardwood – as communities relatively scarce in the state but prevalent in the ACF. The oak communities are important as places where black bears, turkeys, wood thrushes, gray foxes and other wildlife feed on acorns to build the reserves needed for winter. The hemlock communities keep deer and many other species warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer, helping them conserve energy, including that which the oaks supplied. These and other communities in ACF's interior areas are important to, among other wildlife, ground-nesting birds, such as ovenbirds, which can easily be driven off nests and suffer the loss of chicks when dogs are not required to be leashed. She suggested we take note of the most common species found in these natural communities, and focus on creating an ideal habitat for them. We could also train volunteers to get more familiar with the species associated with these communities, and folks could be on the lookout for them and report back when there have been sightings.

As a reference to protecting wildlife and biodiversity in the ACF, Andrea left us with a copy of *A Landowner's Guide – Wildlife Habitat Management for Lands in Vermont*. It is also available for reference and downloading [here](#).