



**Hilltown
Land Trust**
AN AFFILIATE OF THE TRUSTEES

NEWS
**Spring/Summer
2020**

DEDICATED TO PROTECTING THE
WORKING LANDS, NATIVE HABITATS, AND RURAL BEAUTY
OF THE HILLTOWNS SINCE 1986

What Open Space Means Today



Photo by Sally Naser @crwildlifecams

The Bears in Our Woods

Local Conservation Network Success

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What Open Space Means Today

By Sally Loomis, HLT Executive Director

I feel immense gratitude to live here in the Hilltowns. We have access to public trails that aren't crowded, scenic views a short drive away, and a community that cares about protecting these resources for future generations.

Hilltown Land Trust has experienced rapid changes since the beginning of March. Our staff and AmeriCorps members are now working from home, and we have started offering events online. What hasn't changed is taking care of our protected properties and working on future conservation projects.

Fortunately, the Hilltowns have been mostly spared trail closures due to overuse or safety concerns, and the majority of HLT's public access properties remain open. We have had to close one trail (the Historic Dam Trail in Williamsburg), because extensive sections are too steep and narrow for safe use. Our other seven public trails remain open.

Many people have let me know they feel a renewed appreciation for open space now. The mental and physical benefits of being in or even viewing the natural world have been proven in scientific studies. I know I feel this almost instantaneously these days when I get outside.

Another benefit of Hilltown life is the many views of the forests, fields, farms, and rivers from our roads. Our work at HLT has included protecting some of these scenic views in addition to the land beyond.

I don't think any of us could have predicted how much our public trails and views would mean to people during the spring of 2020.

Conservation has always been about long-term thinking and planning: considering the future needs of the community and property owners. In the 34 years since HLT was founded in 1986, I don't think any of us could have predicted how much our public trails and views would mean to people during the spring of 2020.

I encourage you to get outside and explore these hills in whatever way you can, both now and in the future. Use our trails and enjoy the views of our Hilltowns. Please be safe and respect other trail users to help us keep these open spaces available to all. This land sustains our life and health, including our mental health, and that is more crucial now than ever before.



Sally with her family on a recent hike

Volunteers make your local land trust stronger!

If you are interested in volunteering with HLT,
email contactus@hilltownlandtrust.org

The Bears in Our Woods

By Andrew Madden, HLT Board Member

While American Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*) sightings were a rare occurrence as recently as the 1970s, Massachusetts has undergone a wildlife resurgence in recent decades, and bears are now a part of Hilltown life. Bears are generalists and habitat adaptable, but they still need large tracts of undisturbed forest to live a wild existence.

Cubs are born in winter while the mother (sow) is in the den. Den sites vary from protected sites under tree roots, in rock crevices, or in large hollow trees, to simple nests that rely on snow cover for protection and warmth. Having seen a variety of dens in my role as a biologist, I have often wondered how a bear finds these locations. Experienced sows usually pick sites well, which is important because the cubs are active in the den, nursing and crawling as they grow.

When spring arrives, bears emerge and eat any leftover food on the ground, such as acorns and carrion, until greenery becomes available. Spring can also be a stressful time for mothers who must produce enough milk to support 2, 3, 4, or even 5 hungry cubs.



As part of his work as a biologist, Andrew visits bear dens in the winter. Photo courtesy of the author.

Late spring and early summer is breeding season and peak time for bear activity. Yearlings are cut loose from mom and sent on their own. As a result, the frequency of bear sightings and human encounters are greatest then.

By late summer/early fall bears shift their concentration to weight gain. (Most adult bears weigh 150-300 pounds, but males can exceed 500.) This phase of constant eating, or hyperphagia, has direct consequences for bear survival and reproductive success. Healthy landscapes and diverse habitats are crucial for healthy bear populations.

Land conservation and habitat management have played major roles in the resurgence of megafauna in Massachusetts. Hilltown Land Trust's conserved lands support movement corridors and ecological function for many species. Without these, the pressure on large wildlife would greatly increase.

Publicly-accessible HLT properties offer opportunities to see bears and bear signs. Remember that black bears are incredibly powerful animals which require respect. Most bears hear or smell people coming and leave the area quickly. For everyone's safety, social distancing between bears and humans is highly recommended.

Whether you hope for an encounter or prefer to skip that experience, know that when you visit an HLT property you are sharing it with the fascinating black bear.

**Read the full versions of these articles
and more on our website:
HilltownLandTrust.org**

Local Conservation Network Success

In our last newsletter, Sally wrote about Hilltown Land Trust's upcoming workshops to facilitate local dialogue about conservation. Having not held events quite like this in the past, we weren't sure how many people to expect.

This winter, we held two public events: in Goshen and Shelburne Falls. Over 70 town leaders, landowners, foresters, students, and conservation professionals gathered to network and hear presentations from foresters, Open Space Committee members, and conservation professionals.

Perhaps the best part of both events were the small group conversations following the presentations. From the volume in the room, you could tell these discussions produced lively and needed dialogue.

People left with new resources and contacts, and a renewed commitment to conservation. One attendee

reported plans to volunteer for their town's Open Space Committee, realizing "I have a ton of useful skills for my town." Others voiced plans to consult with foresters or pursue collaboration with neighboring towns.

"I have a ton of useful skills for my town."

Our third event, originally scheduled for March in Huntington, has turned into a series of free online webinars. Topics include pollinators, solar array bylaws, vernal pools, active open space committees, and forest carbon. More information about upcoming sessions and recordings of past webinars are available on our website.

Many people are eager to learn how they can help protect open space in their communities, and there is clearly much that we can learn from each other. Perhaps the biggest take-away for HLT is that we need to host more events like this, both virtual and in-person!



Event in Goshen. Photo by Jessica Lerman



Event in Shelburne Falls. Photo by Art Schwenger



Vernal Pool Plunge Volunteers

Volunteer Spotlight: Vernal Pool Plunge!

In spring, as the snow melts and the warm rains fall, many a nook and cranny fills with water. What was once simply a dip in an upland forest may now be a shallow wetland; a vernal pool teeming with life.

Vernal pools are easily overlooked as they dry out during the summer. But they offer vital breeding habitats to several species of amphibians in the spring. These species choose vernal pools over other wetlands because there are no predatory fish to eat their eggs.

Early this March, community members gathered to listen to a presentation by local naturalist Charley Eiseman on the critters—frogs, toads, salamanders, fairy shrimp—that are found in vernal pools. After the presentation, people learned from volunteer participants in last year's Vernal Pool Plunge, a three-day training hosted by Hilltown Land Trust and the Wild and Scenic Westfield River Committee that taught representatives in sixteen towns how to certify vernal pools.

Vernal pools offer a variety of environmental benefits as well. They sequester carbon, purify water, and retain water during flood and storm events. Certifying vernal pools is a way to protect these natural areas from harm. Since the 2019 Plunge training, volunteers have certified seven vernal pools.

There is still more work to do! Fewer than 1 in 8 mapped potential vernal pools in Massachusetts are certified. You can find resources on vernal pool certification and learn more about the Plunge by visiting our website.

We are planning another Vernal Pool Plunge training in 2021! Please contact us if you would like to become a volunteer vernal pool certifier or if you are interested in having a trained representative investigate possible vernal pools on your land.

**Fewer than
1 in 8 vernal
pools in
Massachusetts
are certified.**

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Grey tree frog. Photo by Eric Weber

Leave a legacy for the Hilltowns you love.

Consider leaving a gift for Hilltown Land Trust as part of your planned giving. To learn more about which options are right for you, contact Katie Carr, Development and Communications Coordinator, at: katie@hilltownlandtrust.org



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