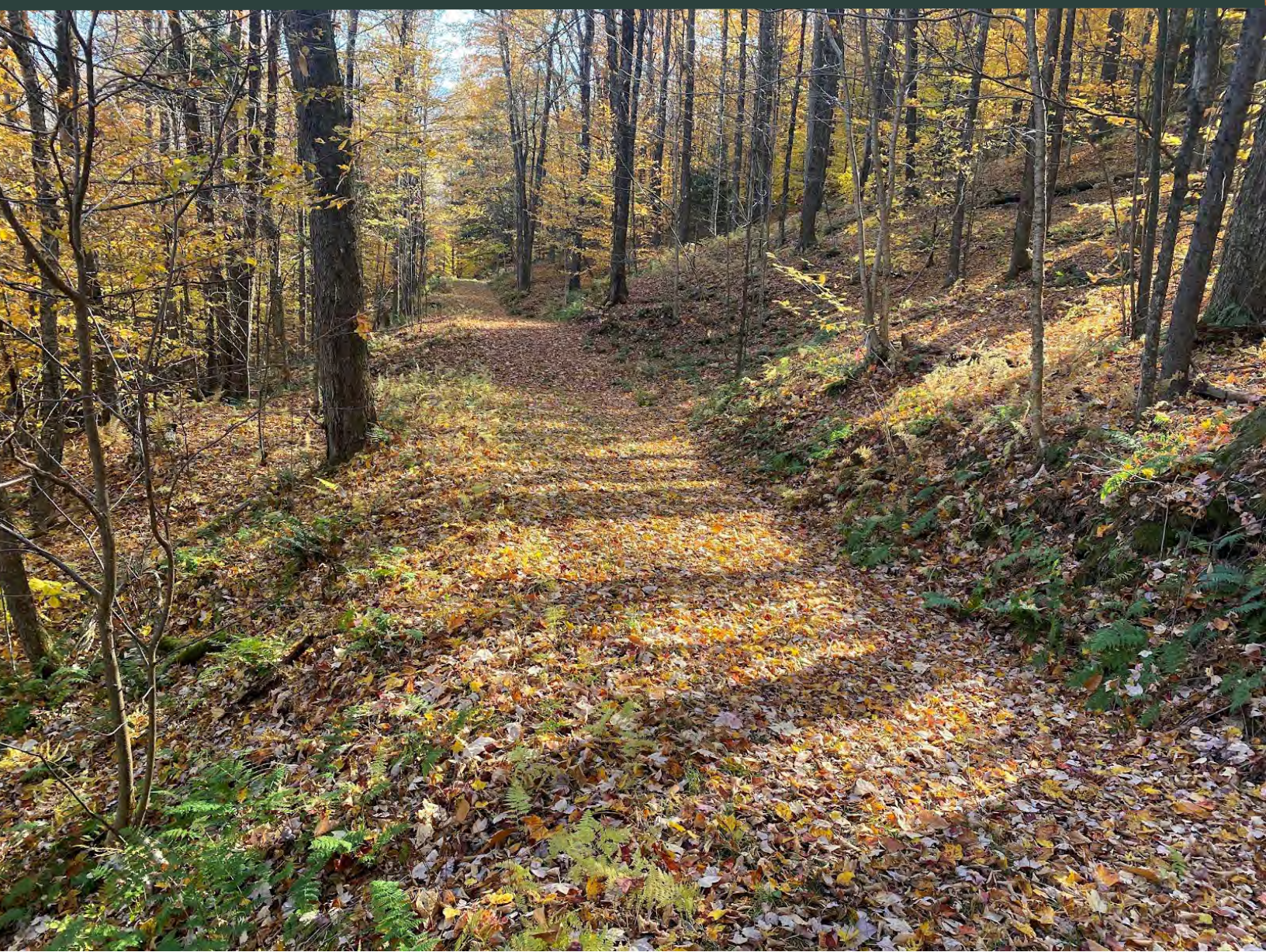
VERMONT FAMILY FORESTS

Annual Report 2024



Applying our Principles and Ideals in the Forest

Without application, principals and ideals have no bearing or test.

– John Dewey

Vermont Family Forests has been involved in forest ecosystem conservation and forest resource management for over 30 years. Our goal from the start has been to help aligned landowners put the health of their forests first while complying fully with the spirit and intent of Vermont's Use Value Appraisal Program (UVA or Current Use). In all of this, we have been guided and inspired by Aldo Leopold, who wrote, "Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve that capacity." This requires changing from a human-centered world view to an Earth-centered one. This change has never been more important than it is now.

The Current Use Program is the most important forest conservation program we have in Vermont. There have been many statutory changes since its inception in 1978, but it retains a strong commitment to forestland production, greater equity in property taxation, and reduced development. In recent years water quality, wildlife species richness, atmospheric carbon sequestration and storage, and flood resilience have received more attention. However, as woodlots have grown smaller and timber harvesting equipment has grown larger, the ecological, economic, and social challenges of conserving forest ecosystem health while meeting the requirements of a 'working forest' have increased. Sustainable forestry requires, by definition, that the forest ecosystem conservation and forest resource management be concurrently ecologically viable, economically feasible, and socially responsible. All three of these can present significant hurdles.

At VFF, when we create a management plan, we start by getting clear on what the landowner's objectives are. We then identify steep, wet, fragile, and riparian areas; habitats for threatened species; rare and unique natural communities; old forests; and low-productivity soils and identify ways to avoid and buffer them. Next, we look for areas that can sustain UVA's productive forestry over time. This means looking at tree age and size class distribution, tree species richness, forest structure and stocking levels, important habitats, cultural resources, recreation opportunities and more that align with landowner values. We value long maturity ages, uneven-aged management by area regulation, and well-designed and maintained access paths.

We then turn to our *VFF Organic Forest Ecosystem Conservation Checklist*. This includes 20 practices for Accessing the Forest and 25 practices for Vegetation Management. We evaluate the location, slope, condition, and extent of access paths to see how best to reduce impacts to water quality and enhance flood resilience. We consider water quality and flood resilience the premier forest products in our rapidly changing climate.

Vegetation management considerations come next. UVA emphasizes stocking (stand density) for a variety of reasons. It is best to accomplish this work commercially and best to postpone the commercial work so there is enough to be economically viable and to reduce unnecessary ecological disturbance and financial expenditures. Keeping equipment small and light and avoiding skidders unless used under increasingly rare frozen conditions is key.

When invasive plants from away are an issue, it is best not to make it worse! If timber is low quality and does not pay its way out of the forest, it is often best to girdle and or directionally fell and leave it to rot in the forest and to slow, spread, and sink storm flows. Again, going slow and easy is better than rushing to get the work accomplished as quickly as possible. In many cases, large standing snags and large downed wood are lacking due to overzealous utilization which depletes these and exacerbates residual stand damage.

In sum, silvicultural work can be very expensive and economically infeasible without government cost-shares, which will likely be scarce for several years. A landowner's bottom line can be improved by cutting less and leaving more and allowing the forest to do its own thing when possible. Forests do not send invoices for their work!

May the forest be with you!

David J. Brynn

David Brynn
Executive Director
Vermont Family Forests

Cover photos, from top left: Wolf's milk mushrooms, Vermont Family Forests' Anderson Wells Farm; Colby Hill Ecological Project small mammal researchers Chris Gray and Carlos Amissah; Line of grace at a family forest in Starksboro.

Our Mission

Observe, understand, and preserve forest ecosystem health,

Practice forest-centered conservation that is wholistic and adaptive,

Support careful management of local family forests for ecological, economic, and social benefits, *and*

Foster a forest culture focused on community well-being, ecological resilience, and the quest of an optimal land ethic.

Below, Hotchkin Family Forest, Granville, VT.

Photo, above: Vermont Family Forests Executive Director David Brynn appreciates the work of beavers on the Lands of The Watershed Center in Bristol.

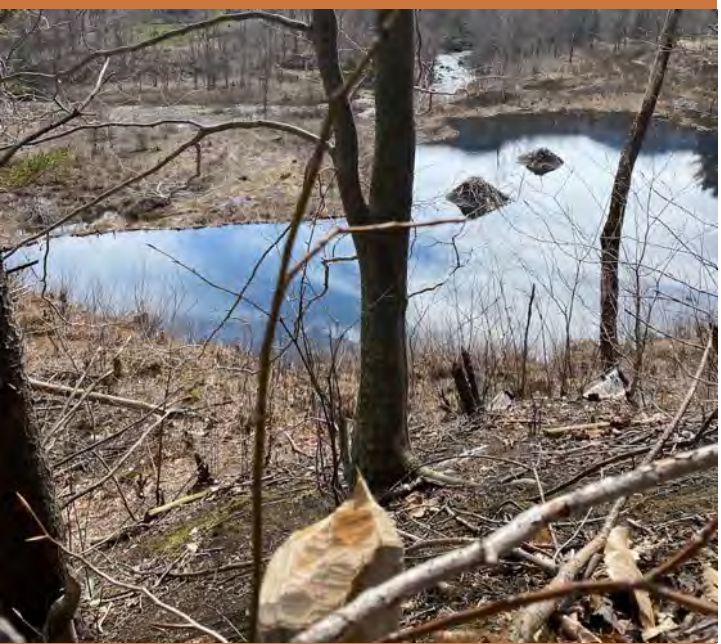
Observe

Above: Vermont Family Forests Executive Director David Brynn admires the work of beavers at the Lands of The Watershed Center in Bristol.

Watch and Learn

Sometimes observation involves rigorous scientific process, and sometimes chance encounters. The bright wood of the beaver-chewed white ash, above, on the Lands of The Watershed Center in Bristol beckoned for a closer look at this bottomland forest where beaver-felled hardwoods crisscross the forest floor.

If you care about slowing, spreading, and sinking the flow of stormwater, it's important to study and learn from the masters of the art. Beavers are our heroes.



Left: While gathering data to update a forest plan in 2024 at Five Springs Farm Family Forest in Starksboro, VFF Conservation Forester Ralph Tursini encountered this beaver pond, and the Huntington River just beyond. By slowing down, spreading out, and sinking in the flow of stormwater, beaver dams help mitigate both flooding and drought and reduce river sedimentation.

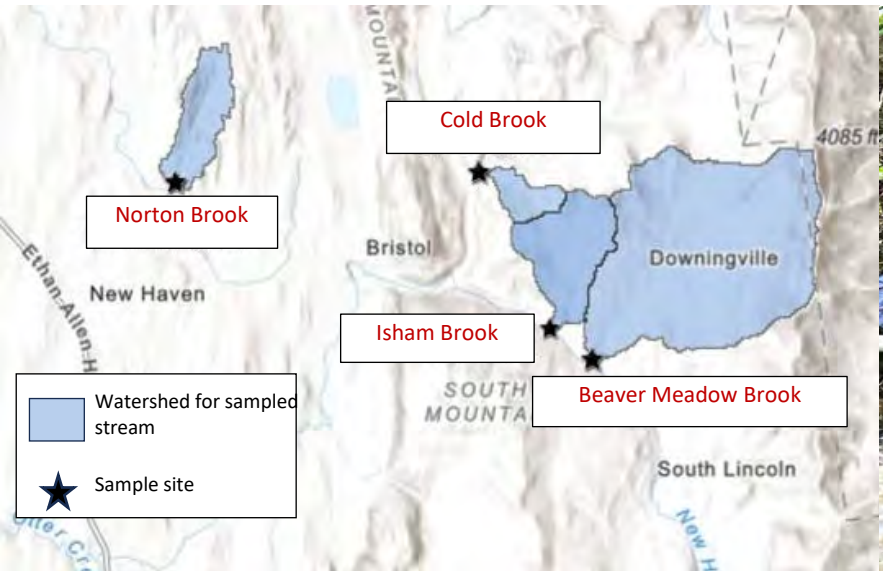
Colby Hill Ecological Project

In 2024, our Colby Hill Ecological Project (CHEP) research team monitored small mammals, large mammals, forest birds, reptiles and amphibians, and water quality. Their data contributes both to CHEP's database as well as to regional and statewide research projects, including the Vermont Reptile and Amphibian Atlas, the Vermont Forest Bird Monitoring Program, and the Addison County River Watch Collaborative.

Above: CHEP mammalogist Chris Gray (right) and University of Vermont doctoral student Carlos Amissah collect a tissue sample from an Eastern meadow vole live-trapped at Vermont Family Forests' Guthrie-Bancroft land in Lincoln. The tissue will be analyzed as part of a UVM research study on tick-borne pathogens.

Left: CHEP researchers meet at VFF's Anderson Wells Farm to discuss ecological monitoring for 2024 and beyond.

Below: Addison County River Watch Collaborative volunteers collect water samples. Norton Brook exceeded state standards for total phosphorus in all four samples taken over the summer, and *E. coli* levels for that brook exceeded standards in 3 of 4 samples. The Norton Brook watershed includes the Lands of the Watershed Center and surrounding farmlands. Of the three other watersheds sampled, only Beaver Meadow Brook exceeded *E. coli* standards in 1 of 4 samples, and none exceeded total phosphorus standards. Read the full reports on our website.



Kate Kelly measures a salamander found at this monitoring site during autumn 2024 monitoring at Vermont Family Forests' Guthrie-Bancroft land in Lincoln.

Observe

Taking Stock of Family Forests

In 2024, Vermont Family Forests' conservation forester, Ralph Tursini, created or updated forest conservation plans for many family forest landowners enrolled in Vermont's Current Use program. One key part of that process is taking an inventory of the trees in the enrolled forest. This inventory, in tandem with the optimal conservation practices outlined in VFF's *Organic Forest Ecosystem Conservation Checklist*, informs his management recommendations. While in the forest, he often has memorable encounters with the plants and animals who are part of the forest community.

Top right: Healthy forests include many large-diameter living trees—which we call legacy trees—like this massive 28" red spruce in the Hotchkin family forest in Granville.

Right: Large-diameter dead trees shelter many animals, including barred owls. Ralph met this juvenile barred owl in late May while inventorying the Williams family forest.

Below: Ralph encountered this porcupine while collecting inventory data in the Five Springs Farm family forest, late April, 2024. All photos this page, Ralph Tursini

Practice

Slowing the Flow

Stabilizing access roads for forest health and clean water—This was a focus of our forest-centered conservation work in 2024.

Whether on our own lands or on the lands of partnering organizations, our aim was to keep forest soils *in* the forest, where they nurture a healthy forest community, and *out* of streams, where they degrade water quality.

Our goal is to change entrenched runoff patterns from past human activities, one waterbar at a time. Do a few dozen waterbars on a piece of land make a significant difference? Across Vermont, 76,000 family forests comprise 2.7 million acres of forestland. Individual actions can make an immense collective difference to the health of our water commons.

Above: The U-shaped contour of this old skid trail at the Seth Hill Waterworks property in Lincoln resulted from years of erosion after a long-ago timber harvest. Since skidders work best when moving directly up or down hill, skid trails tend to occupy steep gradients. The land has slowly healed itself over time, so there's minimal soil erosion now, but the deeply incised trail still concentrates stormflow. The photo above was taken during a storm in the fall of 2024 that dropped about an inch of rain. Rather than sinking into the forest soil, as rains do in unchannelized parts of in the forest, this concentrated stormwater empties into Downingsville Creek, along with runoff from countless other skid trails across the flanks of the Green Mountains.

Right: David Brynn talks with excavator-operator Chris Cram about construction of erosion control structures. This work was paid for through a grant from the Clean Water Service Provider funding program of the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources.

The 10% average grade of this stretch of access road at the Seth Hill Waterworks called for reinforcing broad-based dips with crushed rock. During deluges, the broad-based dips will direct runoff back into the forest, where it can soak in.

Creating a Line of Grace with VYCC

2024 marked our third year of collaborating with the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps (VYCC) to advance forest conservation on Vermont Family Forests lands. At our Abraham's Knees parcel in Lincoln, VYCC crews helped us clear a new forwarding path through the forest. Replacing a steep forest road that had been actively eroding before we installed erosion control structures, this new forwarding path has an average grade of 7%. Crew members felled marked trees and carefully stashed logs and brush on the down-slope side of the emerging trail, where it will help stabilize soils.

Top left: David Brynn marks trees to be cut by the VYCC crew.

Above: VYCC crews used Game of Logging tree-felling techniques to directionally-fell marked trees.

Right: A VYCC crew member clears brush from a felled tree. All wood remained in the forest to nurture and stabilize soils. As in past years, the crew camped at VFF's Anderson Wells Farm while carrying out their work for VFF.

Restoring the Fred Pierce Barn

What does barn restoration have to do with the practice of forest-centered conservation? Using the gifts of the forest carefully and well is front-and-center to forest conservation. Built in the mid-1800s, the old barn at Vermont Family Forests' Fred Pierce Place has long needed significant repairs. For this restoration, we focused on the failed foundation and structure of the old milking parlor, which occupies the south side of the barn.

After VFF staff removed old sheathing and framework, stone mason Jamie Masefield rebuilt the south-side foundation. Vermont Heavy Timber crew members then reframed the 54-foot milking parlor with rough-sawn spruce from Clifford's Lumber in Hinesburg. VFF staff hung new windows and prepped spruce sheathing with a whey-based stain from Vermont Natural Coatings.

Above: The old barn at VFF's Fred Pierce Place in Lincoln.

Above: Pole jacks support the roof of the old milking parlor during reconstruction.

Right: The traditional masonry art of drystone dyking relies on careful stone placement, rather than mortar, to hold stones in place. Walls are framed and ready for windows.

Support

Above: Pat Kinney practices measuring tree diameter in his woodland along Otter Creek. He's interested in caring for forest health while using some timber for his woodworking.

Right: While carrying out Community-based Forest Renewal work on a a local family forest, VFF Conservation Forester Ralph Tursini marks a non-native shrub honeysuckle shrub to help landowners hone their ID skills and choose whether and how to remove them. Like other highly adaptable, prolific "plants from away"—like buckthorn, multiflora rose, and barberry—shrub honeysuckle can spread prolifically in the forest understory and displace native species on which native wildlife species depend.

We keep three Extractigators in our Bristol office to loan to landowners who want to manually remove non-native saplings.

Empowering Landowners

In our work with family forest landowners, we aim to offer information, training, and tools that support their capacity and confidence to actively participate in the conservation activities called for in their UVA forest plans.

In 2024, our conservation foresters met one-on-one with many forest landowners. We offered courses in chainsaw use and site visits to demonstrate effective erosion control practices. We loaned out tools for landowners to use for organically controlling non-native forest plant species and added instructional materials to our online resources library.

For landowners who requested help with their conservation activities, VFF conservation forester Ralph Tursini carried out a range of forest conservation work, from refreshing boundary marks to increasing structural diversity and wildlife habitat.

Support

Left: VFF Conservation Forester Ralph Tursini refreshes boundary paint on witness trees near a corner post. While only licensed surveyors create boundary markings, landowners can and should regularly refresh those survey markings to keep them visible. We offer landowners detailed instructions how to do that themselves. If they' prefer to hire out the work, Ralph steps in as needed.

In 2024, Ralph worked with the Parker family in Middlebury, supporting their efforts to restore their clayplain forest. Heavy competition from non-native plants and intensive browsing by white-tailed deer challenge the restoration process. Conservation strategies focus on reducing canopy disturbance to discourage non-natives, while releasing long-lived native tree seedlings, like the chestnut oak below. A chainsaw crew from the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps helped carry out that work in the summer of 2024. They left felled branches on the ground to shelter those native seedlings from deer browse.

Right: Ralph reviews maps with VYCC crew members before they begin work at the Parker family forests, clarifying where they'll focus their restoration efforts.

Chainsaw Training

For more than 20 years, Vermont Family Forests has offered chainsaw training courses in partnership with the outstanding instructors from Northeast Woodland Training. The courses are immensely popular, and for good reason—students emerge with skills and knowledge that greatly increase their chainsaw-handling abilities. In 2024 we offered eight Game of Logging courses—from Basic Use and Safety through Level 3. We consider it an essential training program that empowers landowners to work safely and carefully in their forest.

Below: David Brynn inspects the Lueders/Dumont family forest after a Level 3 Game of Logging course in October. Hosting some of our chainsaw classes at this family forest has been a win-win collaboration that provides trees for students to fell while helping the landowners achieve their planned forest management activities for the Current Use program.

Above: Instructor John Adler, right, discusses bar and chain maintenance with a Game of Logging Level 2 student in the Middle Barn at Vermont Family Forests' Anderson Wells Farm.

Below: In Game of Logging Level 3, students learn techniques to safely and accurately fell challenging trees. How does a bore hole like this one help in a sticky felling situation? Take Level 3 and find out!

Partnering with Local Organizations

Each year, we partner with other community organizations to advance forest ecosystem health and cultivate what Aldo Leopold called “an intense consciousness of land.”

Below: Professor Luben Dimov (second from right) and his forestry students in the University of Vermont Forestry Summer Camp join family forest owner Lisa Nading (foreground) and VFF conservation forester Ralph Tursini lead a tour of Lisa’s forest, where Ralph has been carrying out Community-based Forest Renewal practices to improve forest health and structural diversity for birds and other wildlife. (Photo Ralph Tursini)

Right: Vermont Family Forests created this sign for The Watershed Center to identify portions of the 1,001-acre property protected by conservation easements that limit allowed uses for the benefit of rare, threatened, and endangered wildlife species.

Right: David Brynn met with students in the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum’s boat-building program, helping them get to know the tree species whose wood they’ll use to build their boat. **Below**, LCMM educator Jack Chappell shares pointers with a student on how to measure tree diameter.

Foster

Cultural Regeneration

The last part of our four-part mission is to foster a forest culture focused on community well-being, ecological resilience, and the quest of an optimal land ethic. In other words, to actively participate in cultural regeneration. Just as a forest ecosystem gains health and resilience from the interconnectivity of its community members, so too with human community. Cultural regeneration takes many forms, but at the heart of it all is connection to, reciprocity with, and care for the land community and one another.

Left: Good food is central to community well-being and cultural regeneration. And if making that good food is participatory, so much the better. This particular pizza, left, was baked in our Wells Farm earth oven during the annual planning meeting of CHEP researchers last spring. Made with dough from our beloved local pizza restaurant, Cubbers, the pizza included sauce made from Wells Farm tomatoes grown by Dechen Rheault and fiddleheads gathered from local wilds by CHEP researcher Matthew Witten.

Below: This white-tailed deer was one of many forest community members captured on mammal researcher Chris Gray's field camera at VFF's Anderson Guthrie-Bancroft land.

Word from the Wolves

We allow hunting of white-tailed deer and wild turkey by written permission on most Vermont Family Forests lands, and we deeply appreciate the hunters we communicate with each year. We respectfully refer to them as "the wolves," since they occupy the niche of large predators that once lived in Vermont. They are our eyes and ears on the ground, and we ask them to complete a brief survey at the end of the year, letting us know about their hunting experience.

In 2024, 21 hunters requested and received hunting permission. Most hunting takes place on the 600-acre Guthrie-Bancroft/Cold Brook parcel in Lincoln and Bristol. In their hunting surveys, hunters noted seeing porcupine, squirrel, rabbit, wild turkey, black bear, white-tailed deer, and many songbirds.

Building Boats and Bonds

One of our all-time favorite community-building collaborations is with the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum's Longboats program. We first meet each new crop of students at the beginning of their semester-long boat-building experience (see page 15), then see them again in May for the launching of the boat they built together, under the steadfast guidance of master boat builder Nick Patch. The process is a deeply inspiring example of the soul-restoring work of building something beautiful, useful, and enduring from local wood.

This year, students built a 25-foot Whitehall-style rowing gig. In late May, community members gathered at the museum to celebrate the students and their beautiful boat.

Right: A happy parade from the museum to the Basin Harbor boat launch, serenaded by a bagpiper.

Above: Boat-building students row the *Gail Parsell* for the first time on Lake Champlain.

One of the many values of LCMM's boatbuilding program is the network of rowing clubs that have emerged in area high schools, all utilizing the wooden boats built over the years by students in the Longboats program.

Winter solstice 2024, photo Jonathan Blake

Seasonal Celebrations

From our summer *Woodwinds in the Middle Barn* to the winter solstice celebration at the Lands of the Watershed Center, we celebrate the seasons in this beautiful place we call home.

Black bear claw marks tattoo this healthy American beech at the Gallagher family forest. Photo Ralph Tursini

Gratitude

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