

Catamount Community Forest Planning Committee

Minutes of October 23, 2017

Approved

Members Present: Terry Marron, Michael Clauss, Jeff Dickinson, Barb Evans, Ben King, Patrice Maloney, Ben Norris, Rita Dessau

Members Absent: Anthony Jordick, Jay Diaz, Kort Longenbach, Steve Page

Others Present: Melinda Scott (staff), Kim Coleman (facilitator), Kate Wanner (Trust for Public Lands), Andrea Shortsleeve (Department of Fish and Wildlife), Ethan Tapper (Chittenden County Forester), Lucy Jones (COFC), Carl Runge and Bruce MacPherson (Green Mountain Audubon Society)

Goal: Discuss and develop strategies for wildlife management best practices

1. Kim reviewed the meeting goals and objectives.
2. **Housekeeping items:**
 - Proposed meeting topics and schedule – The group reviewed the proposed schedule of meetings by topic area. There were no questions or comments.
 - Discussion leads sign-up – Kim reminded the group that there are still topic areas that needed discussion leaders. Melinda stated that topic areas with slots open include Water Resources, Town Regulations, Ag Uses, and Educational Uses. Kim and Melinda clarified that Discussion Leaders can meet and email each other to plan for future meetings without needing to publically notice.
 - Approve 9-25-2017 minutes – The minutes of 9-25-2017 were approved with minor revisions such as including the Little Bellas numbers of participants and mentors, inserting bullets for clarity. Patrice Maloney noted that it was important to identify who was asking questions, to which Melinda responded she will make a more concerted effort in all future meetings.
 - Other items? No other items were brought up.
3. **Overview of Williston Country Parks and Conservation Areas** – Melinda presented a brief overview of Williston’s natural areas, including where they are located and how they are used and managed. The purpose was to establish an overall context for the Catamount Community Forest.
4. **Wildlife/Bird Habitat and Conservation**
 - **Andrea Shortsleeve – Presented on wildlife connectivity and habitat best management practices.** The PowerPoint presentation has been uploaded to the Google Drive site in the 10-25-2017 folder.
 - Andrea spoke about Catamount and how it fits into the larger picture of habitat connectivity, as well as the inherent conflict between recreation and wildlife. Catamount is part of the Northern Appalachian/Acadian Ecoregion. Within that, Catamount is within one of the five priority linkages. Being along the western edge

of the Green Mountains foothills, it serves as an important east-west link. In other words, the forested block of which Catamount is a part allows animals to travel between large habitat blocks. This is especially important as the climate is changing and animals need to adjust their ranges.

- Andrea demonstrated a chart that shows how the number of species decreases as habitat area gets smaller. Andrea then gave an overview of the different types of habitats in Catamount, including deer wintering areas, northern hardwood forest, young field, old field, shrubland, grasslands, wetlands and vernal pools.
- Some important features in these habitats include beech and other mast trees, snags, tip-ups and coarse woody material.
- Andrea explained how gradual transitions between habitats, or “soft edges” are important to wildlife.
- Andrea discussed the problem of invasive species, and what invasives are currently present at Catamount.
- Andrea discussed the impacts from recreation on wildlife. As recreational activities and trails are expanded, the impacts to wildlife increase. As the group makes decisions about new activities and new trails, it is important to be aware of the impacts those decisions could have.
- **Carl Runge spoke about grassland bird habitat– (Summary sheet on Google Drive).**
 - GMAS has been documenting birds informally from 1996 to 2008, formally during 2009 – 2011, and then informally since then. 144 species have been documented at Catamount, 53 confirmed breeding birds.
 - There is great diversity of birds because of the great diversity of habitats at Catamount. GMAS overall goal is to maintain and enhance habitat diversity, thus enhancing bird diversity.
 - Carl spoke about grassland bird habitat. The grassland habitat is on the south side of road. There, Meadowlarks, Savannah Sparrows (on westernmost knoll), and Bobolinks have been seen.
 - Bobolink is the signature species, and is in decline. It is a long distance migrator that winters in South America and breeds in northern US and southern Canada. Its nesting success depends on the mowing schedule. Bobolinks start nesting in early June, and they have been observed as late as mid-August.
 - Best Management Practices –
 - Larger fields are better (> 10 acres)
 - Delayed mowing is best (after Aug 15 and before May 15)
 - Less disturbance is better
 - If not hayed, the field should be mowed at least once a year in the fall.
 - Currently, a local farmer leases the easternmost meadow at Catamount for haying, and the term ends in 2019, but can be renewed if both parties agree on the terms. The farmer pays the McCulloughs \$30/acre for 30 acres (\$1050), with the expectation that he will get at least 250 – 40# bales of hay.

- Bobolink project provides a way for farmers to be compensated for delaying their mowing. Jim McCullough has applied the last two years but has not received an award. If he were to get an award, the farmer would honor it.
- Recommendations include applying to the Bobolink project in 2019 and future years. If no award, another strategy might be to reduce farmer's payment to compensate for delayed mowing on the east field.
- Carl and Bruce recommend closing the through trail on the east field during the breeding season but keeping perimeter trail open. The benefits of these trails are that they limit people's movement to the trail and keep them out of the rest of the field.
- Patrice asked do the Bobolinks prefer highland or lowland fields? Carl wasn't sure.
- Kate Wanner asked why not treat all 35 acres that way? Carl stated they only nest in the east field and in Patrice's west field. Therefore the east field is of primary interest.
- Carl stated that Bobolinks can only nest once, whereas Savannah Sparrows can try to nest a second time if at first they fail.
- Ben Norris asked what will happen to the lease if the Town acquires the land? Carl stated that the lease runs with the land, so the Town acquires this lease with the property.
- **Bruce MacPherson (summary sheet on Google Drive) spoke about the other habitats at Catamount**
 - Bruce thanked the Town for working to conserve the property. Catamount is an important link in the forested habitat of Vermont, and the forests are important bird habitat.
 - Responsibility bird species are birds whose breeding territory is largely confined to the northeast US. Audubon Vermont's website lists 40 "responsibility" birds in Vermont. Five of these species are found only in specialized habitats (eg Bicknell's Thrush on mountaintops and Spruce Grouse in boreal forests). Of the remaining 35 responsibility birds the GMAS has identified 28 species at Catamount, 13 of which are confirmed breeders there.
 - Catamount is also important as a stopover for migratory bird species. McCulloughs timber management program has been beneficial for birds. Green Mountain Audubon conducted an Inventory in 2009 of birds and habitat on Catamount. One recommendation is to update this inventory, and Audubon would be happy do this at no charge.
 - There is significant shrubland at Catamount, especially within the VELCO powerline ROW. This is particularly important for birds of conservation concern such as Golden-winged Warblers. Vermont is the only state in New England that supports these birds. Audubon has been surveying the VELCO powerlines and has found a high diversity of birds. GMAS recommends a focused monitoring survey of the shrubland habitat. GMP and VELCO have provided funding for such

monitoring and have been very receptive to managing this shrubland to enhance bird habitat.

- GMAS also recommends that wetlands and associated buffers be maintained.

○ **Questions for all presenters:**

- Kate Wanner asked, does it make enough of a difference that we're not getting deep snow anymore? Are the deer wintering areas still important? Andrea stated yes, that even though snow depths have decreased, the deer wintering area still provide wind protection.
- Ben Norris asked, what is a riparian wildlife connectivity block? Andrea answered, it is habitat alongside a stream used by animals to travel to and from larger habitat blocks.

5. Discussion of management plan revisions related to wildlife habitat – Melinda projected the Draft Plan with suggested changes highlighted.

- The group discussed Andrea's recommendation to contain the current population of invasive plants. Ethan Tapper stated that eradication is not a feasible goal for most invasives, but control is. He recommended strengthening the language to say "lower the current population" or "seek to decrease the population" of invasive species.
- Mike Claus asked if any of the recommendations involved rerouting existing trails? Andrea stated the closures she recommended are seasonal, not necessarily permanent. Ethan said the group should look critically at the entire trail system and consider permanent closures if necessary.
- Terry reviewed the suggested recommendations of Carl and Bruce. They recommended adding a new section titled "Wildlife Habitat Management" that incorporates these recommendations.
- One recommendation was to apply to the Bobolink Project. Kate stated that the Town could do a joint application with Jim McCullough for 2018 since we won't own the property by the time the applications are due. Kate is recommending the farmer meet with the Town this fall, to ensure the lease transfer goes smoothly.
- Ben asked whether there would be time to consider these recommendations and return to them at a later date, so that all the recommendations can be looked at holistically in light of their potential effect on the overall trail system. The Committee agreed this was a good approach to take, and Kim suggested tracking all the recommendations and how they might impact trails, then readdressing them more holistically at a later time. She and Melinda will flag trails that could potentially be closed seasonally or permanently as recommended for different reasons.
- Mike Claus asked about the possibility of not being able to find a farmer to hay the property were the Town to restrict the mowing schedule, because it would be too restrictive and would affect the quality as well as quantity of the hay harvested. How would the Town then keep the meadows open?
- Patrice reminded the group that Lea Davison has stated that the field is currently used for Little Bellas programing.

- Carl stated the haying program is really important so the Town should negotiate an agreement that works for the farmer.
 - Ethan asked whether other areas could be used for haying that are not managed for Bobolinks.
 - Kate noted that most of these recommendations pertain to birds, the group may wish to include recommendations regarding other kinds of wildlife. Andrea stated that bird BMPS also benefit other wildlife species.
 - Mike asked about the costs and responsibilities associated with the management of the property. What is the plan for continued maintenance? Kim stated we need to include the costs and responsibilities in the Management Plan, and perhaps the group could look at this during the same meeting that considers revenue generating activities. Timber harvest is one way to pay for management activities.
 - Bobolink/haying discussion will be tabled to future meeting, as will a discussion of broader wildlife management strategies.
- 6. Updates to Selectboard** – currently scheduled for Nov 7. The group decided to wait until December so that more information can be provided.
- 7. Open Comment** – There was no public comment.

On the agenda for next month:

- Consideration of other recreational uses – dogs, horseback riding, hunting/trapping, camping, other?
- Lease agreement discussion

Meeting was adjourned at 8:15 PM.

Minutes were approved on 11/27/2017