



Executive Director David McGowan:

What a strange spring it has been. With so much happening, it's easy to feel overwhelmed by it all. So what's a person to do?

Go outside, of course! All Rural Lands properties have remained open during the pandemic. In the outdoors, you'll find solace, resolve, and inspiration, perhaps all in the beautiful refrain of a shy hermit thrush. It's something our conserved lands provide to people free of charge every day of the year.

While we are saddened that so many of our programs and activities had to be cancelled, we are adapting to changing times. Instead of leading guided hikes, our Trails Committee members have been writing hike descriptions and Cathy has emailed them out. The response has been great: Members have told us they tried new hikes and discovered new parts of Williamstown they never knew existed.

Similarly, our Woodchuck Wednesdays program had to be cancelled, but Education Coordinator Kathy Chesney swiftly adapted it online. There are now nature education activities for families to do at home on our website. You can explore everything from camouflage to bird nests to splash hikes!

COVID-19 has exposed weaknesses in our food system. Rural Lands is exploring new opportunities to protect farmland, engage young

farmers, and address food insecurity. And, now more than ever, we need to focus on land conservation as part of the solution to the climate crisis.

Many of you have expressed your appreciation for the trail maintenance that Lands & Trails Coordinator Dan Gura has been doing. Because we were unable to host our usual summer trail crew, Dan will be extra busy. Look for his new informational kiosks at major trailheads later this summer, part of a grant from the Williamstown Community Chest, in coordination with the Town of Williamstown.

Thanks to the generosity of a board member, WRLF was able to hire two interns this summer. Gray Miller and Jacob Grunebaum will be working on projects like interpretive signage, a Williamstown tree guide (inspired by Dusty Griffin's talk last winter), and a Seven Summits challenge. We look forward to the energy and enthusiasm both will bring.

We missed our members and supporters at events like First Up! at Bascom Lodge and our annual Firefly Hike. Please know that we are working on developing safe ways to offer programs to you this summer and fall. Stay tuned!

We are grateful for you, our Rural Lands community. It has been gratifying to see lots of families fishing for tadpoles at Sheep Hill – a bit of normalcy in an upside-down time.

In this issue:

1

Never a better time to seek nature

2

A mysterious arrival

+

Outdoor education at a distance

3

Trails into the past and future: a reflection on the shutdown

4

Saying goodbye to the daredevil of Sheep Hill

Keep in touch!



671 Cold Spring Road
Williamstown, MA 01267



413-458-2494



ruraland@wrlf.org



www.wrlf.org



facebook.com/wrlfssheephill



wrlfssheephill

Williamstown
Rural Lands Foundation

grassroots
promote
educate



Executive Director David McGowan:

About that blank spot...

It has been a year since WRLF initiated its rebranding project. We kicked it off last summer with listening sessions and focus groups. We are incredibly grateful to all who participated.

Based on that feedback from our members and supporters, Trampoline, the marketing agency hired by Rural Lands, dove into the meaty work. Trampoline staff patiently lead WRLF's brand refresh working group and board through a gauntlet of challenging decisions, including a possible name change, tagline, logo selection, color scheme, and more.

To the volunteers on the working group – my heartfelt thanks. Your humor, thoughtfulness, and baked goods got us through. We have a great result.

So, where's the big reveal? The "Move that Bus!" moment? It's coming.

We are now planning the rollout. We would like to have everything in place before making a formal announcement – things like our website, letterhead, business cards, merchandise, etc. Look for our big splash this fall. We are very pleased with the final product. We hope you'll be, too.

Education Coordinator Kathy Chesney:

Our evolving fight to keep education available

As society came to an abrupt halt this spring, so did all of our educational programs at Sheep Hill. Spring and early summer are our busiest times for these programs: Woodchuck Wednesdays, vacation and summer programs, and school field trips keep us energized from April – mid July. Sadly, none of these events will be happening this year.

By early March, we had lined up Williams College interns for the spring session of Woodchuck Wednesdays and most of our local school field trips had been scheduled. Our first inkling of what was to come occurred when Williams College announced that it was sending students home due to COVID-19. As the pandemic escalated, schools closed, and stay at home orders were put into place, we went from looking for other volunteers to realizing that all of our spring, then summer programs would have to be cancelled.

The reality of these cancellations along with the temporary closure of all our buildings, including the nature cabin, was difficult for all of us. We love sharing the magic of Sheep Hill with children and know how much

they look forward to our programs.

In lieu of a physical Woodchuck Wednesdays program, I began a weekly column called Woodchuck Wednesdays Wherever. Originally, the column was going to run for five weeks, the length of the program, but it was so much fun to write and so well received that I continued through the rest of the school year, eleven articles in all!

Obviously, we had to make decisions very quickly. Everyone was caught off guard and teachers were confronted with the enormous task of distance learning. In hindsight, perhaps we could have prepared some online activities for classes that were scheduled to visit Sheep Hill this spring. We don't know whether field trips will be an option in the fall either. However, if classes won't be able to visit us, we can certainly explore the possibility of online resources for teachers.

All of us at Sheep Hill look forward to the day that we can once again welcome the public with open arms and resume the environmental education programs our visitors have come to expect.



Lands and Trails Coordinator Dan Gura:

Taking the long view on outdoor access

This summer was going to be a busy one out on the trails: Our annual Guided Hike Series was due to start in May, and we had marked the calendar for bi-monthly Trail Stewardship workdays: hands-on opportunities for you to learn about trail-building. And, as usual, our Trail Crew was ready-to-rock.

The pandemic led us to postpone events and re-frame the season. Setbacks like these are frustrating, but it helps to step back and take the long view. If you look back — say, 200 years — a hitch in our momentum isn't too big a deal. In fact, a journey through time reminds us that we're on the right track. Williamstown's history of land stewardship and outdoors recreation is centuries-long. When we begin again with group activities like trail building and hiking, just remember: you are continuing a tradition that dates to the 19th century.

Mount Greylock's Hopper Trail was built in 1830. By 100 people. In one day! A group of 12 founded the United States' first organized hiking club, the Alpine Club of Williamstown, in 1864. Later, the Civilian Conservation Corps came along in the 1930s to cut hiking and ski trails on Mount Greylock. Williamstown Rural Lands' inaugural trail-building effort took place in the Hopper during

the late 1980s. Our first trail intern picked up a shovel in 1999.

I don't expect 100 of us to be out together working the same trail any time soon, but I do hope that we can grow a "Williamstown Conservation Corps" of sorts: a group of people like you who



I do hope that we can grow a 'Williamstown Conservation Corps' of sorts.



participate in stewardship days, adopt and maintain a local trail, or lead one of our guided hikes.

The early 20th century saw the first publication of Williamstown-specific hiking guides: specialized, pocket-sized booklets to "indicate the location of beauty spots around Williamstown and how they may be reached." The first guide, *Mountains of Eph*, was produced in 1927. It included a mere handful of pages. The most recent guide runs above 200 pages. A bit less pocket-sized than earlier

editions.

This year, Williamstown Rural Lands plans to install 10 kiosks at local trailheads. Each one will display a map, a hike description, as well as guidelines for preparedness and safety. We will also produce an accompanying brochure. The goal is to give locals and visitors inviting, direct access to information about Williamstown's rich outdoors opportunities, its "beauty spots."

In the long view, WRLF is a spring chicken in this game. But our goals are the same as those of the locals tramping these hills long before us: Engagement with the natural world — building trails, stewarding land, enjoying it together.

But some of our challenges are different. In the shadow of climate change, we protect forests in part because they are so good at sequestering carbon. We conserve blocks of land in coordination with other organizations and then also protect the links between them in order to maintain broader ecological integrity.

You, me, all of us — we're standing on the shoulders of local efforts stretching back nearly 200 years. Each successive generation improves our shared experience of the outdoors. This summer might not look how we hoped it might, but don't worry. We'll be back out there soon.



Assistant Director Cathy Talarico: Thank you, Wayne Morrison

On a September day, you may have noticed the freshly mown meadow at Sheep Hill. The mowing pattern becomes more pronounced as autumn progresses, and the slopes begin to look like they are blanketed in brown corduroy, with each line, or wale, representing a long tractor ride between the hedgerows for Wayne Morrison of Williamstown. For 15 years, Wayne has been doing this challenging job. Mowing a meadow as steep as ours is not for the faint of heart, and to anyone who knows Wayne, a life-long recreational motorcyclist, he is hardly that! Last September, after completing the mowing, he let us know that it would be his last as he would be retiring. Wayne, we appreciate how you so patiently waited 'til late season, managed to avoid the milkweed and navigated the gullies and seeps

without mishap. Thank you for your many years of helping to steward this land with your skill and your tractor. We also appreciate Bob Haley, who bravely did the job for the first few years of our ownership of Sheep Hill.

Without an annual mowing, the meadow would become a forest as so many of the early farms of town have become. With Wayne's help, and biennial government grants like the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP), Williamstown Rural Lands has maintained the bulk of its 55-acre former dairy farm as a cultural meadow. It provides excellent habitat for a large variety of meadow and edge birds, butterflies and other pollinators, and a myriad of mammals. A human benefit of this culture is that it makes for good sledding, skiing and snowshoeing for the public.

NON PROFIT ORG
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
NORTH ADAMS, MA
PERMIT NO. 219

Williamstown Rural Lands Foundation
Sheep Hill
671 Cold Spring Road
Williamstown, MA
01267