



# NEWSLETTER

Sheep Hill | 671 Cold Spring Road | Williamstown, MA 01267 | [rurallands.org](http://rurallands.org) | (413) 458-2494



## Spring is in the air! Though we've enjoyed winter.

Have you enjoyed a walk on local trails? Perhaps marveled at the gorgeous views across the landscape? Do you feel reassured that the milk, cheese, and meat from our local farms is safe and free of dreadful substances? Did your kid come home excited, wet, and dirty from one of our nature discovery programs?

You might rest well knowing that there is a local organization minding the store—protecting the bounty that nature provides: clear water, fresh air, healthy populations of fish, tranquility, and resilient habitat to accommodate the northward migration of plants and animals in this changing climate.

Williamstown Rural Lands is pleased to bring you programs, steward trails, and offer hikes and tranquility. We partner with you, your neighbors, and conservation peers to keep nature ticking, our farms clicking, and you feeling safe and happy outdoors.

Read on to learn about our new series *Knowing Your Landscape*, land acquisitions (spoiler alert: 24 acres were donated to us in 2022) and how you can help us conserve more land, programs this spring, and how to get published! We invite you to engage with us.

## WRL Board of Directors

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## Staff

**Robin Sears**, Executive Director  
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**Cathy Talarico**, Assistant Director  
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**Dan Gura**, Stewardship Director  
*trails@rurallands.org*  
**Dana Williams**, Programs Director  
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## WRL in numbers

**Members:** 341, and counting ...

**Volunteers** currently serving: 48

**Operating budget:** on the order of \$300,000

**Grant funding awarded** past 11 mo.: \$54,025

**Acreage protected** in perpetuity: 940

**Conservation easements** we oversee: 11

**Miles of trail** we steward: ~60

**Children whose knees** got dirty over the years: ~6000



*Remember when? We've come a long way at Sheep Hill.*

## Who We Are

Williamstown Rural Lands is a private, non-profit, member-supported land conservation trust. It was founded in 1986 to address the loss of open space and public access, the disappearance of family farms in the Williamstown area, and to encourage responsible development.

Our mission is to conserve and promote natural and working landscapes in Williamstown and its environs for the benefit of our communities and future generations.

At Sheep Hill, we work in the Mary and Craig Lewis Center for Nature & Local Heritage, and visitors can enjoy displays in the Jack and Maureen Dietze Interpretive Center on farming, building, milking, and nature.

Read on to see how we manage to do all that.

## Keep in touch!



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## Land Acknowledgement

With gratitude and humility we acknowledge that we are learning, speaking, hiking and gathering on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people, the Indigenous people of this land. Despite tremendous hardship in being forced from here, today their community resides in Wisconsin and is known as the Stockbridge-Munsee Community. We pay honor and respect to their ancestors past and present as we commit to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.

## From the Executive Director

It has been a whirl-wind year since joining Rural Lands in March 2022. Through our farmland conservation project to kids programming and parties, I've so much enjoyed getting to know the community, the organization, and the places we conserve.

Since you last heard from us in June, we have ramped back up to a pre-Covid schedule of activities, hired a new programs director, received donations of forestland, pursued farmland protection, and participated in many meetings and working groups for land conservation and nature education.

We are thrilled to initiate work with DEI Outdoors to train up in principles and practices of diversity, inclusion, and belonging, with the goal of making our organization and the lands we steward a most welcoming place to all.

We've already learned so much through our *Knowing Your Landscape* series. For example, there is now a mechanism for landowners with at least 40 acres of mixed hardwood forest to engage with the carbon market. We learned that a landowner may have multiple goals in stewarding their land, such as promoting bird or fish habitat, controlling invasive plants, creating a view, or establishing a pollinator meadow. It takes knowing your lands to be able to set goals. We hope you will engage with us to learn about, then plan and implement actions to care for the our environment in Williamstown. Your stewardship might be as simple as loving it.

We are pleased to partner, share ideas, and collaborate with numerous other land trusts, environmental organizations, and land stewards across the Berkshire-Taconic region. These partnerships and conversations inform the decisions and actions we take here in Williamstown on land management, trail stewardship, programs, and organizational management.

We hope you will enjoy our events, programs, and trails as well as bask in the nature that surrounds and supports us. And please spread the love: Encourage a friend or neighbor to become a member of Williamstown Rural Lands.



Robin Sears  
WRL Executive Director



This resident red tailed hawk watches over Sheep Hill and serves as a barn cat in the sky — keeping the mouse and rabbit populations in check.

## Did you know?

We hope you will join us in learning about land stewardship in the *Knowing Your Landscape* series. Here we share scary news on emergent invasive plant species, brought to us by Rene Wendell of The Nature Conservancy.

If you see this gorgeous primrose in our wetlands, seeps or streams, we beg you to pursue its removal with vigor. Japanese primrose was introduced as a lovely garden flower, but it escapes and is clogging up waterways, crowding out native species with astonishing ease.



*Primula japonica*

Be ever vigilant to the emergence of Japanese stiltgrass in our forests and roadsides. This non-native, nearly unstoppable plant is devastating the forest understory in south county, and we don't want it here.



*Microstegium vimineum*

Hardy kiwi (*Actinidia arguta*), black and pale swallowwort (*Cynanchum louiseae*), and chocolate vine (*Akebia quinata*) round out the most egregious invasive plants that we want to keep from establishing.

# Land conservation

Our community became 41 acres richer in protected natural and agricultural areas in 2022. Two generous neighbors donated forested parcels to Rural Lands, each with an attendant stream. Both properties can be found on our website. Rural Lands also assisted with the establishment of an Agricultural Preservation Restriction on 17 acres of Bill and Kelly Galusha's farmland. We thank the Town of Williamstown Select Board, which endorsed these conservation efforts.



## Judge Tiffany Nature Preserve

Anne Tiffany loves the land she grew up on. "I never gave it up," visiting on weekends from her home in Peabody, MA with her husband, James Tiffany. Anne returned permanently in 1990 to fully enjoy the tranquility of her family's homestead.

Anne initiated discussion about conserving a portion of the homestead in 2016. "It was a land between two conserved parcels, and I thought it should be a joiner." She ultimately decided to donate 14 acres of forestland from the homestead to Rural Lands, and Berkshire Natural Resources Council (BNRC) placed a conservation restriction on the parcel.

The Judge Tiffany Nature Preserve lies between WRL's West Branch Green River Conservation Area, protected in 2019, also with the help of BNRC, and Windy Hill Farm, private land with a conservation restriction. Together, the three parcels comprise 178 contiguous acres of open space and encompass nearly a half mile of Green River's West Branch.

Anne gifted the parcel in memory of her late husband Judge James B. Tiffany. "He and his dog would go walking in the woods whenever they could." In memory, too, of generations of daughters. "This homestead has always been passed to a daughter, ever since 1830."

Anne's donation was supported by the Commonwealth's Conservation Land Tax Credit Program, which recognizes and rewards landowners who conserve land.

## Buxton Brook Preserve

On the other side of town, on lower Petersburg Road, sits a second forested parcel that Rural Lands acquired through donation in 2022. This 10-acre lot provides watershed protection to Buxton Brook, a sub-basin of the Hoosic River. The cascading, cold waters of this mountain stream bisect the property west-to-east.

Gerret and Kathryn Van Duyne, who donated the undeveloped parcel, are "thrilled to support WRL's efforts to conserve natural habitat and undeveloped land around Williamstown, which are an important part of what makes the town and community so special."

The local impacts of climate change, including increasing ambient temperature and extreme weather events, disproportionately affect cold-water stream communities. The species you might find here—Appalachian brook crayfish or brook trout, for example—need clean, cold water in order to thrive. A riparian buffer of protected land helps to maintain these conditions.

This parcel is plagued by invasive plants and tree pests, both of which result in canopy gaps that allow sunlight to warm the environment below, including the stream.

Rural Lands will take an active approach to stewarding this property to mitigate warming through canopy closure by controlling invasives control and encouraging regeneration.



## What's the news on Oblong Road, and how can you help?

Rural Lands is slated to purchase the ten-acre parcel of pastureland on Oblong Road in early April. We will retain ownership of the property, leasing it to a local farm operator for pasture or hay while establishing a spot for visitors to rest and enjoy the view.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the members of our community who have supported the project in diverse ways. The Williamstown Select Board endorsed our bid after receiving supportive letters from the Planning Board, Agricultural Commission, Conservation Commission, and Board of Assessors and appeals by townspeople and Sweet Brook Farm operators Sarah and Darryl Lipinski.

Generous donors have stepped forward to help with the purchase. We appreciate guidance from colleagues at Berkshire Natural Resources Council

and the American Farmland Trust on how to structure this acquisition for permanent conservation.

We are especially pleased to partner with the Trustees of Reservations, which will buy the conservation restriction from us, helping to offset the total cost of this project and open the door for potential future collaboration.

"The Trustees is thrilled to work with the wonderful team at Rural Lands to conserve this critical parcel along the Oblong Road corridor. Our 300-acre Field Farm property is nearby, and we are excited about expanding the positive impact of protecting farmland and scenic views as well as enhancing public access in this area of Williamstown." - Nicie Panetta, Interim CEO of The Trustees

### We need your help to get us over the line

The Cook family, a long-time pillar of the community, has put up \$55,000 to match your donation.

Your participation—with any amount—contributes to

- \* Protecting farmland and local food systems
- \* Securing aquatic and wetland habitat
- \* Expanding a conservation corridor
- \* Providing public access to peace and tranquility

### Help us meet the Cook Family Challenge by April 7

Drop us a check, or donate online at [www.rurallands.org/news/cook-family-challenge](http://www.rurallands.org/news/cook-family-challenge)



The fish in Sweet Brook, birds in the hedgerow, and insects in the meadow thank you for your compassion.

And Rural Lands thanks you. We trust that you will enjoy this protected spot as much as the birds and the bees do.



# WRL Programs



*Scything practice at a Working Lands/  
Working Hands workshop.*



*Greylock Elementary 3rd Grade Field Trip to  
Sheep Hill*



*Van and Claudia Ellet discuss forest  
management options with Dana and Dan  
in our Knowing Your Landscape series.*

Our programs are designed to inspire and prepare current and future generations for connection to the land and nature. Field trips, family nature nights, interpretive hikes and more—Williamstown Rural Lands offers a diverse array of programming to suit your nature needs.

Have you joined Programs Director Dana Williams in her new series of **Interpretive Walks** on the third Saturday each month? She brings deep interest in the natural history of our region and is keen to share her knowledge of our natural surroundings. Knowledge can deepen your sense of place.

Two series are designed to support your own involvement in conservation and land stewardship:

**Working Lands/Working Hands**, where you learn first-hand how farmers, land stewards, and natural resource managers produce all that gorgeous lumber, veggies, flowers, and hay, and how you might, too.

**Knowing Your Landscape**, in which we share principles and practices of land stewardship to empower landowners to identify and achieve their own goals through seminars, demonstration, and field visits.

Kids get out and get dirty in our after school and **vacation programs**, and through school field trips. Families are also invited to explore Sheep Hill on their own time. Visit our nature cabin and the Dietze interpretive center and pick up a DIY-outdoor adventure kit. Or come join us for a family nature night, like our summer Firefly Hike and February Owl Prowl—where families gather to learn about creatures and habitats.

Keep your eyes on our **Events** page for topics that interest you. Coming up is a seminar and site visit related to the complicated and comprehensive Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act. As maddening as environmental regulations might be, it is helpful to be informed. Remember, knowledge is power.

## Coming up in Spring

Woodchuck Wednesdays, starting April 5  
Amphibian Nature Night, April 7 or 14  
Kids Vacation Program, April 17-21  
Family Walk at the Clark, April 20  
Repair Café with SWCA, April 29

Knowing Your Landscape field visit, April TBD  
Mass. Wetlands Protection Act, May TBD  
WRL Annual Meeting of Members, May 20  
Book Group, 3<sup>rd</sup> Thursdays  
Interpretive Hikes, 3<sup>rd</sup> Saturdays

# Engage with us

Rural Lands invites you to engage with us.  
We have new initiatives to join, letters to fold, and parties to throw.

## Call for submissions: Rural Lands Arts & Literature Review

*A celebration of Williamstown natural and farming landscapes through literature and art*

What inspires you about the Williamstown landscape? Please share with us! We are pleased to partner with Tupelo Press, and with the support of the Northern Berkshire Cultural Council, to plan a review of art and literature centered on Northern Berkshire natural and working landscapes. We invite submissions by local writers and artists—at any level—of essays, poems, and visual art work that may inspire the rest of us to see and sense a familiar place through a different lens. Works will be featured that encourage appreciation for and lend an understanding of the our glorious landscape, published in both print and electronic volumes.

Accepting submissions through August 30, 2023. Visit [rurallands.org/news](http://rurallands.org/news) for details. This pilot initiative is supported in part by a grant from the Northern Berkshire Cultural Council, a local agency which is supported by the Mass Cultural Council, a state agency.



### Join a committee

Want to dive in deep? We are looking for a hearty and hardy few to join our **Events Committee** to help plan gatherings and fundraising events.

### Attend social events

We invite all members to join us at the **Annual Meeting of Members** on May 20.

Meet your friends at WRL social events throughout the year. Stay tuned for details. Note that Sheep-to-Shawl occurs biennially, so see you in 2024.

### Donate items

We seek the following items:

- \* Standing desk - desktop or stand alone
- \* Standing desk floor mat
- \* Cordless telephones, one pair

### Take a hike, marvel at bark

Join Programs Director Dana Williams on her monthly interpretive walks to learn about the natural history of the area. And our popular Guided Hikes organized by our Trails Committee will resume with the warmer weather.

### Help us go big

We have a bold vision for the coming years at Rural Lands. One key area is the expansion of our nature discovery programming for kids and youth. Perhaps you know of a **charitable foundation** that might align well with our vision. We invite a conversation with you or an introduction to a program officer to explore the potential for new enduring relationships.

## The landscape is about to pop with Spring



Thank you for your Membership. Please spread the word.

Williamstown Rural Lands is a non-profit, member-supported land conservation trust. We rely on our members—people like you!—to keep us going as we work to conserve and promote the forests, fields, and farms of Williamstown. A WRL membership keeps your finger on the pulse of local conservation and gets you discounts on WRL programs and merchandise. You help to protect natural ecosystems and farmland in perpetuity, support local farms, and keep outdoor recreation accessible. Thank you!



Working Lands/Working Hands workshop

**WRL partners with regional, state, and national conservation entities and initiatives**

Woodlands Partnership of Northwest Massachusetts  
Berkshire-Taconic Regional Conservation Partnership  
Berkshire Wildlife (Greens to Hudson Highlands) Linkage Partnership  
Trustees of Reservations  
Berkshire Natural Resources Council  
American Farmland Trust

**We are grateful for recent grant support from the following entities:**

Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation  
Massachusetts Cultural Council  
Natural Resource Conservation Service  
Wild East Action Fund of the AT Conservancy  
Williamstown Community Chest



We are stronger together

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