

## **Page Pond Community Forest**

*Scott Powell, Meredith, New Hampshire, Conservation Commissioner*

Upland forest, prime agricultural land, important wetlands, education, accessible recreation — all of this has come together in the Page Pond Community Forest in the central New Hampshire Town of Meredith. This community forest now has additional acreage as the result of efforts by several conservation entities, including The Trust for Public Land, New Hampshire Land and Community Heritage Investment Program, Meredith Conservation Commission, and the USDA Forest Service Community Forest Program (CFP).



*Page Pond on the Page Pond Community Forest. The new CFP-protected property is on the left; the original tract is on the right. (Forest Service photo by Neal Bungard)*

Many generous grants and private donations, including a \$300,000 grant from the [USDA Forest Service Community Forest Program](#), were used to add 198 acres of forests and fields in October 2017 to the existing 565-acre Page Pond Community Forest. In addition, a generous private donation was made to fund an endowment, which will be used to manage the property in perpetuity.

Although almost all of the newly acquired property is now forest, there are 30 acres of fallow fields and additional “important agricultural soils,” which are uncommon in New Hampshire. Additional environmental and habitat aspects include wetlands, vernal pools, streams, and critical nesting habitats.

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Because the community forest is within walking distance of the Town Center and the elementary, middle, and high schools, the area has already been used as an outdoor classroom and is being incorporated into the school district curriculum. University of New Hampshire professors and students have also visited the property to learn more about it and guide the Meredith Conservation Commission on how to best manage its forests, fields, and shrublands.

In the first year, the number one priority was managing non-native invasive plant species. Like most New England farmstead land, there is a plethora of invasive species on the property. These include Japanese knotweed, multiflora rose, Oriental bittersweet, Japanese barberry, and autumn olive. Of these, autumn olive was the most pervasive, having taken over the fallow fields.

Approximately 30 acres of overgrown agricultural fields were mechanically cleared in the first year; several more years of work will be required to restore the fields to native species. Attention will be focused on preventing non-native invasive plants from spreading further into the forest, which would be detrimental to the trees and would make their long-term management even more challenging.



*University of New Hampshire student Kate Magner examines a chestnut-sided warbler nest on the Page Pond Community Forest. (Courtesy photo by Scott Powell, Meredith Conservation Commission)*



*View of 30 acres of fields after the removal of non-native invasive plant species on the 198-acre Page Pond Community Forest addition. (Courtesy photo by Scott Powell, Meredith Conservation Commission)*

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An enthusiastic team of volunteers, locally known as the Tuesday Trail Crew, has performed most of the work on the property. This team is mapping the wetlands; historical sites (gravesites, the old cellar hole, and long-forgotten farm equipment); nesting areas, and hiking trails. They are also working with the Town Forester on the forest management plan. This group meets every week from April through November (and in the winter as needed) to maintain this and other conserved areas in the Town of Meredith, New Hampshire.



*Members of the volunteer Tuesday Trail Crew work on the Page Pond Community Forest. From left to right: Rodney Stokes, John Sherman, Don MacFarlane, and Paul Dillon. (Courtesy photo by Scott Powell, Meredith Conservation Commission)*

Initial trail assessment has begun with determining the best route to connect the new trailhead on the CFP-acquired parcel, which is close to the school and town center, with the existing 10-mile network of trails on the existing Page Pond Community Forest property. Trails to bring the public to the old cellar hole and Leavitt family cemetery will also be created. The Meredith Conservation Commission has already completed a Community Forest Stewardship Plan and worked with the Town Forester to prepare a Forest Management Plan. Together, with input from the public, these plans will be used to guide management of the community forest to achieve the long-term objectives of conservation and recreation on the property.

The key objectives as listed in the Stewardship Plan are these:

- a. To protect and enhance fish and wildlife habitats, rare and exemplary plants and natural communities, including deep water emergent marsh, short graminoid-forb emergent marsh, black ash-red maple seepage swamp community, and Appalachian oak-pine rocky ridge, and the ecological processes that sustain these natural heritage features.
- b. To protect water quality by preserving and conserving waterfront, streams, riparian areas, wetlands, and the quality of aquifers, groundwater, and surface water resources on the property.
- c. To re-establish an agricultural use for local food since a portion of this property includes abandoned agricultural fields with good soils. The plan is to recruit a local farmer to utilize a portion of the property under a lease arrangement.
- d. To preserve cultural resources, including the historic mill site, a cemetery, and an old homestead.
- e. To retain the property in perpetuity as a sustainable tract of land for the production of timber, pulpwood, and other forest products, although no management activities shall be undertaken with the primary purpose of income generation.
- f. To provide public pedestrian access on the property, which will allow the general public to hike, hunt, fish, cross-country ski, observe wildlife, and participate in other low-impact outdoor recreational activities, and snowmobile on designated trails.

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The objective of improving forest health and wildlife habitat will include sustainable forestry that also supports the local timber economy and gives the Town of Meredith a source of income to make periodic improvements to the community forest. In addition to the 560 acres of mostly upland forest on the original tract, this new tract adds more than 150 acres of managed forest, some of which had previously been heavily cut, but which will now be integrated into the existing sustainable forestry program with the other parts of the community forest.

The overall forest health is relatively good. The most common tree species are white pine, red oak, hemlock, and mixed hardwoods. Issues to be monitored with these species are, respectively, blister rust, canker, annual ring shake, and insect or disease infestation. Some of the pine areas have shown very small symptoms of blister rust; these stems have been removed in previously cut areas and will continue to be salvaged in the future. All harvesting will be on a marked-tree basis under the supervision of a licensed professional forester.

The forest acquired using CFP funds is rated high for horizontal diversity and moderate for vertical diversity, with a good mix of forest types and a diversity of species and age classes. The vertical diversity is highest where there has been recent harvesting on the community forest. Openings that are created develop diverse layers of ground cover, understory, and midstory vegetation. Future forest management will strive to create a diversity of timber age classes and types that will increase both vertical and horizontal diversity. Openings of various sizes will increase the amount of browse available for deer and moose. Oak and beech of seed-producing age will be maintained to provide mast for food. A large stand of aspen and alder will be managed for grouse and woodcock habitat, while dead and dying trees will be left standing to provide den and nesting sites for birds and mammals.

Such a large and varied community forest, close to schools and the center of a town that is a major tourist center, presents a unique opportunity for conservation as well as education. The property is large enough that recreation can be planned to allow access to the borders of undeveloped tracts, which protects large areas for wildlife. Visitors from urban areas who are attracted to New Hampshire's lakes and mountains will be able to readily gain an appreciation of nature and experience the physical and emotional benefits it provides us. Educating our youth will also develop the next generation of conservationists to continue this work into the future.



*Pileated woodpeckers are one of many species that depend on dead trees found in mature forests; this one was hunting insects from a rotting stump on a nearby Meredith property. (Courtesy photo by Scott Powell, Meredith Conservation Commission)*