As we begin commemorating our 50th anniversary, I’ve been sorting through documents from our early years. I found one batch of letters dated November 15, 1972 to our first members, addressed “Dear Kestrel Family.” That made me stop and think. **Conserving the lands and waters of the Valley is about caring for home and family**—the places we share with the people and wildlife we love. This has always been at the heart of what Kestrel does.

So many people have been involved with Kestrel in these last five decades, and we celebrate you for coming together to conserve more than 25,000 acres of forests and farms across the Valley. Natural parks and trails close to home. Rich soil to grow food. Woodlands where all sorts of wildlife find shelter. Meandering streams to explore with our kids. This is why we live here.

This winter, we invite you to be part of a virtual celebration at kestreltrust.org/50years. There, you’ll find music, videos, and stories—like Daniel’s below—that celebrate why people love our Valley.

Because of your support, we are now looking ahead to the places that need to be saved in the next 50 years for urban, rural, and suburban communities across the Valley—to stem sprawling development, to provide natural solutions to the climate crisis, and to ensure everyone has access to natural places to feel connected and restored.

The next 50 years start now. **Thank you for joining us on our journey together to conserve the Valley you love for future generations.**

Kristin DeBoer, Executive Director

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**Finding the Path Home**

by Daniel Kasal

“When I was growing up in Westhampton, I was a free-range kid. I’d head out into the woods with my dog, spending hours in the trees and streams near my house. The woods seemed endless and I’d follow the trails until my growling stomach or the fading light sent me home.

I still spend as much time as I can outdoors. This year, when I was looking for a new spot to visit with my partner, I saw that Kestrel had provided access to a newer trail system at the Greenberg Family Conservation Area. My partner and I followed the path down to the brook and something tugged at my memory. On a hunch, I suggested a turn down the path. Sure enough, my feet led us up the hill to my childhood home. I’m so grateful that Kestrel Land Trust has been able to preserve a place that was so special to me, and likely to many people before me. Now it will be protected into the future, for many others to enjoy as well.”
50 Years & Many Ways of Connecting You to the Land

Nature Books & Trail Guides
During the first three decades, Kestrel produced at least a dozen guides to educate the community about its conserved lands. “Around & About Amherst” (1971) combined natural and cultural history lessons with a recreation guide. “A Guide to Amherst Conservation Areas” (1980) described 25 conservation areas. “Guide to the Robert Frost Trail” has gone through four editions since the trail was created in 1982. Birds were also a focus, with “Birds & Their Habitats in Amherst” (1984) and “Birding Western Massachusetts” (1996). In 2010, Kestrel helped produce “Harvesting History: Amherst Massachusetts farms, 1700-2010” by Ruth Owen Jones. In 2018, our “Trails for Everyone” maps debuted online.

Growing the Next Generation
Not everyone has equal access to nature close to home. That’s why through partnerships with organizations like Eagle Eye Institute, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, and the CARE Center in Holyoke, Kestrel is creating more opportunities for kids and teens in the Valley’s urban areas to experience how nature can help them feel healthier, stronger, and happier.

The Arts & the Land
For generations, the Valley landscape has inspired artists. Beginning with founder Bob McClung, an artist and writer, Kestrel has long had a connection to the arts. Photography exhibits like “Focusing on the Range” (2005), art exhibits with R. Michelson Galleries in Northampton (2017 & 2020), plein air paint outs with Lewis Bryden, and photography workshops for all ages have connected artists—and all who enjoy their work—to the land.

“Lovely Kestrel hike today in the Saw Mill Hills. Even after 30 years in the Valley, I keep discovering wonderful new places!” —Marianne Gambaro, Belchertown

Nature Walks & Talks
After the merger with Valley Land Fund in 2011, former VLF board member Ann Kearns developed Kestrel’s monthly guided walks program. Since 2012, local naturalists, expert birders, and educators like Laurie Sanders, John Body, Richard Little, and Dave King have led more than 150 walks and educational programs connecting more than 2,000 people to nature and the land.
WHEN YOU WENT TO THE GROCERY STORE during the early weeks of the pandemic, seeing empty shelves may have been a shocking experience. For lots of us, it was our first time confronting food scarcity.

Nationwide, many people face this harsh reality every day, and millions more are facing it now because of the pandemic. Food insecurity is just as real here in western Massachusetts, where over 100,000 residents lack access to healthy food every month. It’s a potent reminder that farms are essential to keeping us all healthy and well-fed—not just during the pandemic crisis, but every day.

To help address this challenge, Kestrel partnered with The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts to create a new Food Bank Farm to strengthen food security in our region. This project was the culmination of a decades-long effort to protect a 193-acre farm in the northeast corner of Hadley on the border with Amherst and Sunderland.

**Farmland Needed More Than Ever**

This land, owned by the Szala family, was so important that community members were trying to save it 25 years ago. Valley Land Fund, which merged with Kestrel in 2011, started a conversation with the family about protecting their farm back in 1994. Kestrel kept that conversation going, as residential development continued to press in and threaten this historic family farm.

Some seeds take a long time to germinate, and this one finally sprouted in 2018, when the two remaining Szala siblings—both of whom were aging—decided to act. Kestrel crafted a plan that worked for the family, bringing together The Food Bank, other local farmers, and the Towns of Hadley and Amherst to protect the farm and surrounding woods. In March—just as the pandemic hit—The Food Bank became the official owner of 142 acres of farmland, and another 26 acres were conserved and sold to the neighboring owners of Mapleline Farm.

This spring, The Food Bank contracted with local farmers who grew and delivered 27,000 lbs. of organic vegetables—equal to 22,500 meals—to The Food Bank in lieu of cash rent, as well as 20,000 lbs. of organic vegetables for Springfield Public Schools for children at risk of hunger. Next year, the vegetable harvest for schools in high-poverty areas is expected to increase significantly.

Andrew Morehouse, Kestrel Trustee and Executive Director of The Food Bank, says the project is different from a typical food bank model of relying on donated food. "It’s an investment in local farmland for organic farmers to strengthen our local food economy while also providing a reliable source of healthy food for those who need it most.”

50 YEARS LATER, A LINK TO FIRST CONSERVATION AREA

In addition to the creation of The Food Bank Farm, 25 acres of woodlands and wetlands off Route 116 were conserved by the Town of Amherst, funded by Community Preservation Act Funds. This new Szala Family Conservation Area will connect the Podick and Katherine Cole Conservation Areas, which were Kestrel Trust’s first land projects with the Town in the early 1970s.

Kestrel will hold a Conservation Restriction over this town land, and will work with the Town to create a welcoming entrance with improved parking and trail access to connect these trails to others on the adjacent farm. Kestrel will also hold a trail easement over the farm, and work with The Food Bank to create a trail system offering the public the opportunity to explore the farm, woods, and a historic canal.
Preserving Our Past and Saving Our Future

OUR VALLEY IS DEFINED by its fertile farmland, rocky mountain ranges, and large forests. Since 1970—with willing landowners, government and nonprofit partners, and individual supporters like you—Kestrel has conserved nearly 25,000 acres of these lands.

Conservation efforts not only preserve our historic landscapes and views of the past, they also benefit our planet and our communities for generations to come. Here are a few of these lands that now protect wildlife, fight climate change, provide local food, and provide natural places for people to get outdoors.

Forests—whether wildlands or woodlands—store carbon in living trees, decaying logs & the soil.
Wetlands and no-till farmlands sequester carbon too.

NATURAL CLIMATE SOLUTIONS

BREWER BROOK FOREST 1,000 acres

A last large block of unbroken forest in MA. Highly resilient to climate change, and critical regional corridor for wildlife.

PAUL C. JONES WORKING FOREST 3,486 acres
Brushy Mountain, Leverett & Shutesbury (2012)

Largest private conservation restriction in MA, ensuring sustainable forest management & protecting wildlife habitat, with public access for hiking, hunting and fishing.

RECREATION

TOWN PARTNERSHIPS

Amherst (1971-2020):
Partnering with the Town to create 50 conservation areas & counting, from Puffers Pond to Mount Pollux.

Northampton (2011-2020):
Assisting the City to conserve and care for 1,000+ acres of public conservation areas from Fitzgerald Lake to the Mineral Hills.

MOUNT HOLYOKE RANGE 2,000+ acres
Amherst, Hadley, Granby, South Hadley (1978-2020)

Creating better public access with the State for hiking—including the New England Scenic trail—while protecting water quality and wildlife habitat.

LOCAL FOOD

RED FIRE FARM 75 acres
Granby (2001 & 2015)

Enabled young farmers Ryan and Sarah Voiland to create a successful organic vegetable farm and CSA, providing food for thousands of people.

BARSTOW’S LONGVIEW FARM 123 acres
Hadley (2015)

The 7th generation of Barstow family dairy farmers used funds from the sale of the Agricultural Preservation Restriction to invest in sustainable energy and modern technology for their farm. Part of a collaboration protecting 1,000 acres on Mt. Holyoke Range.

GREAT MEADOW FARMLANDS 70+ acres
Hadley (2006-2015)

Historic farming area with valuable, fertile floodplain soils supports many farmers and varieties of food and nursery plants.

WILDLIFE & WATER

SILVIO O. CONTE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE 300+ acres
Fort River, Hadley (2009-2013)

Protects the Fort River, the longest free-flowing CT River tributary, and surrounding grasslandlands, both providing important habitat for rare and threatened marine and bird species. Offers a popular universally accessible trail for the public.

WEST QUABBIN WOODLANDS REGION 1,000+ acres
North Belchertown (2002-2020)

In 2001, 22 trained Kestrel volunteers concluded that a critical wildlife corridor exists between the Quabbin Reservoir and the Mt. Holyoke Range. With the Town, forests in this area have been protected for moose, bear, bobcat, and other large mammals.
“SALUS NATURAE, SALUS POPULI”—a healthy land means a healthy people. One of Kestrel’s original founders, Toby Dakin, suggested this as the fledgling land trust’s motto, because it captured Kestrel’s mission to benefit communities both wild and human. It also expressed a land trust’s enduring task—caring for land by keeping it healthy, and caring for people by inviting them to enjoy what land has to offer.

This care is known as land stewardship, which includes a variety of responsibilities. Legally, it means getting out on the land every year to make sure it’s being treated as intended, and not misused or encroached upon over time.

Stewardship can also mean managing land to improve wildlife habitat, such as controlling invasive plants, mowing to maintain a grassland, or creating breeding sites. Our Kestrel Nest Box project and our Spadefoot (Toad) Pool Partnership are examples, as is our Mount Warner Meadow pollinator project, all currently in progress.

Creating Welcoming Nature Areas

For Kestrel, a top stewardship priority has always been connecting people to the land. During Kestrel’s early years, this meant improving Amherst town conservation areas with bridges, boardwalks, benches, parking areas, and trail improvements. All this work was done by volunteers.

Today, Kestrel takes an even more active role in improving and expanding the community’s connection to special places. Public access considerations often drive our early thinking about projects, and we collaborate with towns and other entities to develop well-funded and community supported land protection projects that enhance public opportunities to enjoy new or existing trails and other outdoor amenities. Although Kestrel now has staff to coordinate and manage these efforts, dedicated volunteers still do much of the hands-on work!

Visit These & Other Places Less Traveled!
kestreltrust.org/connect/explore

Find trail maps for hikes near you: More maps to come in 2021!

Here are two of the latest special places that now invite you to enjoy the outdoors:

PEMBERTON MEMORIAL FOREST (Pelham): Jointly owned and managed by Kestrel and the town, this 53-acre forest makes a previously landlocked 78-acre Kestrel parcel available to the public via Arnold Road. There is now a small parking pullout, a trailhead kiosk, and a new 2-mile trail loop. This area connects to more than 250 acres of Town conservation land and 66 acres of private conserved land.

HOLLAND GLEN FOREST (Belchertown): Adding 45 acres to this 290-acre Town forest in 2017 ensured protection and public access on both sides of Hop Brook. To replace a severely deteriorated portion of the old M&M Trail along the ravine, a new trail has been created, providing an easier hike to the top of Hop Brook falls, with a loop back to an improved parking area. A kiosk is planned for early 2021.

Volunteers from Kestrel’s Woodworking Crew building a kiosk this fall.
IN 1970 AS THE FIRST EARTH DAY launched the modern environmental movement, a group of Amherst residents who were part of the first Conservation Commission came together to form The Kestrel Trust. They saw new commercial and residential development impacting the town, and wanted to ensure that its forests, farms, and riverways were conserved as Amherst grew into a bustling college town.

Kestrel’s founding mothers and fathers included Janet Dakin, Robert McClung, Charles Chase, Bradlee Gage, Robert Garrabrants, Dona Motts, Thomas Quarles, and William Sheldon. Over the next 40 years, many more dedicated local volunteers—educators, lawyers, farmers, writers, scientists, business people, and musicians—continued their work to save land in Amherst and later in Sunderland, Leverett, Shutesbury, Pelham, Belchertown, Hadley, South Hadley, and Granby.

In 1986, as sprawl began to impact the whole Valley, another group of dedicated volunteers formed the Valley Land Fund, which became a valued partner of Kestrel Trust. VLF’s founders included two long-time conservation leaders: Terry Blunt (1941-2010), who led the Commonwealth’s Connecticut Valley Action Program and Pete Westover, who directed the Town of Amherst’s Conservation Department. After its first projects protecting a strawberry farm in Montague and acquiring woodlands for Wendell State Forest, VLF spent 25 years partnering with public agencies to protect nearly 10,000 acres throughout the Valley.

In 2011, the leaders of these two volunteer organizations combined their 65 years of history to become Kestrel Land Trust. The merger launched a new era of proactive land conservation with a small professional staff that worked to expand community visibility and increase grassroots membership, building Kestrel into a strong partner for towns and state agencies.

**BEING THE CHANGE**

**The Passionate People Who Shaped the Valley's Land Trust**

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**WE THANK ALL THE VOLUNTEER TRUSTEES who have served Kestrel during our first five decades. Below, we pay tribute to two who launched the most recent chapter of our history, setting Kestrel on a path to become the Valley’s go-to land trust for the next 50 years and beyond.**

**Judy Eiseman:** Judy, a 50 plus year resident of Pelham, has been politically and environmentally active since the early 1970s, serving on town, county, regional, state, and non-profit boards and committees. In multiple leadership roles, she has brought her deep experience with municipal citizen engagement to Kestrel for more than 30 years. In addition to her intense focus on protecting wetlands, Judy also worked to focus public attention on protecting the centerpiece of our Valley—the Mount Holyoke Range. Judy still serves on Kestrel’s Advisory and Lands Committees, and chairs the Pelham Planning Board.

**David Ziomek:** An Amherst native who grew up on a family farm, Dave served for more than 20 years as a trustee of both the Valley Land Fund and The Kestrel Trust. Trained as an environmental planner, Dave formerly directed the Hitchcock Center for the Environment and helped launch the Great Falls Discovery Center in Turners Falls. Now as the Director of Conservation and Planning and Assistant Town Manager at the Town of Amherst, Dave partners with Kestrel to create new conservation areas and protect farmland, while steering development to the town’s four village centers.

**Janet Wilder Dakin**

Janet Dakin and her husband, attorney Winthrop “Toby” Dakin, were founding members of the Kestrel Trust. Janet was the driving force for the first decade, serving as board chair, and later as executive director. Engaged civic leaders, Janet and Toby also helped establish the Dakin Humane Society and Hampshire College.
Jamie Malcolm-Brown

Winter S-Curves, DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPH

After a recent dusting of snow, I was driving down the hill on Leverett Road to the Valley, going from Shutesbury to Amherst through Leverett. The sunset colors were reflecting off the clouds above, so I quickly found a spot to pull over and captured the scene just before the sun set. The Pioneer Valley has such a diverse landscape. It inspires me to get out and explore all the amazing hikes, lakes, and waterfalls. If I get lucky, the conditions are just right and I’m able to capture some of the beauty that we are all lucky to share.

See more of Jamie’s photography at jamiemalcolmbrown.com or on Instagram at jamiemalcolmbrown.