WHAT'S INSIDE: Bringing Conservation to the Community
New Mount Tom Trail Race is a Winner
Creating Welcoming Trails for All
Local Action, National Importance

AS ANOTHER CHALLENGING year comes to an end, I remind myself to focus on gratitude. Because of people like you, I don’t have to look very far. As a Kestrel member, your support means so much to our staff, our board, and to me personally. I’m confident that with you on our side, we’ll have the ability to keep doing the important work of saving land.

Your support is important not only in the Valley but also as part of a much bigger national effort. The Land Trust Alliance recently released a new report finding that 61 million acres were conserved by land trusts as of year-end 2020—an increase of 15 million acres since 2010.

This dramatic increase in land conservation shows that the land trust community is gaining ground in Massachusetts and nationally, with a total of 466,157 acres conserved in the Commonwealth. That’s a 35% increase since 2010. (See more of the Land Trust Census at findalandtrust.org.)

And it’s not just about the land. Land trusts across the nation are also using the power of conservation to address the challenges facing their communities, from the impacts of the climate crisis to inequitable access to the land. In this issue of Your Valley, read more about how Kestrel is doing that work with communities—and with your support.

Have a safe and happy New Year.

Kristin DeBoer, Executive Director

YOUR VALLEY STORY

Surrounded by Beauty
by Elisa Campbell excerpted from The Amherst Current

I’ve lived in Amherst for 50 years, and have always loved the mountains, fields, and woods where I could go to walk, photograph, and feel peace. During the pandemic, I’ve appreciated these places even more. I can walk out my door and head in one of three different directions to conservation areas or the Rail Trail.

I’ve found that I pay more attention to the natural places right around me. The open sky above Wentworth Farm Conservation Area is always beautiful and the pond reflects it in fascinating ways. Little Gull Pond across the road has turtles, ducks, muskrats—even an osprey.

Within a short drive are many other wonderful natural places, including the Mount Holyoke Range, Buffam Brook in Pelham, or Mount Warner in Hadley. I’ve found profound peace in being in these places, learning about the plants that grow there, marveling at the light in the woods or reflecting on the surface of ponds. I fell in love with the Eastern Painted Turtles and learned who is who among the birds. I rejoice in the abundance of life around us.
New Mt. Tom Trail Race Wins

MORE THAN 230 RUNNERS AND VOLUNTEERS came out for the first Mt. Tom Trail Race to celebrate this iconic mountain range. Coordinated by Beast Coast Trail Running, the October 23 event supported Kestrel’s Mt. Tom Fund to conserve and expand public access on nearby lands in Easthampton and Holyoke (see pages 4-5).

Race director Amy Rusiecki said, “The trails at Mt. Tom are amazing, so we’re thrilled to offer the opportunity for runners from across New England to experience this local gem and help support Kestrel’s important work to preserve the places we love.”

Kids Learn About Nature & Self

ON A CHILLY MORNING IN EARLY December, 12 “Littles” and their “Bigs” from Big Brothers Big Sisters of Hampshire County (BBBS) gathered at Kestrel’s home on the Mt. Holyoke Range. The young people stood close to their adult companions, bundled up for a winter walk. In small voices, the Littles shared their names and something they loved about winter. Snow. Ice skating. Being cozy inside.

Curiosity set the pace during the nature walk. The youth stopped to feel fuzzy sumac stems and observe ice collecting at a stream edge. They raced ahead when the path evened out and slowed down again to touch phragmites and watch ducks.

After the walk, Jen Lapis from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service gave a presentation on animals’ winter survival strategies. The kids had gained confidence to answer and ask questions, as they reflected on how they themselves withstand the cold. They compared the winter and summer pelts of foxes, and experienced the insulating effect of blubber via a Crisco-filled glove and a bucket of ice water before heading back outdoors for hot cocoa.

As the event wrapped up, one of the Bigs was talking with Miranda, the Program Supervisor from BBBS. “I didn’t know Serenity and Poppy were friends,” she said, gesturing at two girls giggling on the dock. Miranda replied, “I don’t think they were until today.”

Kestrel will hold three events with BBBS in 2022, providing more opportunities for youth to enhance their connection to nature, while supporting them as they develop positive relationships with others—big and little.
By partnering with communities, we can create welcoming public lands that meet the diverse needs of more people.

It wasn’t a typical day at Community Field Park in Holyoke: People milled around posters, white boards, and the Holyoke Hummus Food Truck. Up the hill, historic Scott Tower and Anniversary Hill Park sat out of sight in the woods. Yet both were very much on the minds of City and Kestrel staff hosting this community event to reimagine this historic place for the future.

One of many reasons we conserve land is to support a community’s goals, which often includes creating public conservation areas, parks, and trails that reflect residents’ needs. Kestrel is supporting these efforts in Holyoke and other communities.

**HOLYOKE: Revitalizing the Historic Anniversary Hill Park**

In the 1940s, Holyoke’s Anniversary Hill Park south of Mt. Tom was a popular destination for picnicking, sledding, and walking. As was the style of parks built in the 1920s, the City’s crown jewel boasted stone footbridges, stairs, and a dramatic centerpiece, Scott Tower: a structure with spiral stairs and multiple viewing levels. In the 1960s, construction of I-91 cut through the park, separating the wooded hill from the lower area now known as Community Field. Over the following decades, the park fell into disrepair and public use plummeted.

As the park’s 100th anniversary approaches, the City of Holyoke plans to make Anniversary Hill a welcoming destination for the community again. In 2020, 14 acres of forest adjacent to Scott Tower went up for sale for private development. With a loan from the Norcross Wildlife Foundation, Kestrel was able to purchase the land, holding it until the City receives funding to buy the parcel for the park next year. After that, Kestrel will hold a Conservation Restriction on the land. (See CPA sidebar on page 5.)

**AMHERST: A New Future for Hickory Ridge Golf Course**

In Amherst, a similar effort is underway to create a conservation area that meets community needs. The Town is planning a new public life for the former private Hickory Ridge Golf Course in South Amherst. Kestrel is supporting the Town’s effort to purchase and protect much of this 150-acre parcel. Since the Community Preservation Act provided partial funding for the
How the Community Preservation Act Benefits the Land You Love

Many of Kestrel’s conservation projects happen in partnership with towns and cities. The Community Preservation Act (CPA) provides funds to Massachusetts municipalities that opt in for conservation, historic preservation, recreation, and affordable housing. Any land that towns purchase and conserve with CPA funds must have a permanent Conservation Restriction held by an independent land trust or conservation agency. Kestrel provides this added layer of protection to public lands in the towns of Amherst, Belchertown, Northampton, Easthampton, Holyoke and others. Current partnerships include these on either side of the Connecticut River:

➤ Northampton: Expanding Mineral Hills & Saw Mill Hills. Partnering with the City to acquire three parcels totaling roughly 64 acres to expand the Mineral Hills, Saw Mill Hills and Parsons Brook Greenways. These lands will provide wildlife habitat, trail connections, and recreational opportunities, including advancing Northampton’s vision of creating a “ONE Northampton” loop trail around the City. For smaller parcels of land like these, CPA funding can be one of the only funding sources available to a community, making it a critical tool in partnership with a land trust.

➤ Belchertown: DuBois Community Forest. Assisting the Town in conserving 80 acres of forest land using CPA funds to match a federal grant for forest conservation. As part of a large undeveloped block of forest, the project will protect a landscape-scale wildlife corridor from the west Quabbin uplands to the Mount Holyoke Range. While this purchase is largely to conserve land for our wild neighbors, there will be opportunities to create new trails and to offer community programs about forest stewardship.

Purchase of the land, when the project is complete Kestrel will hold the Conservation Restriction on the natural areas and trails, including the extensive frontage along the Fort River.

The land is rich in natural beauty, ecological resources, water, and recreation opportunities. Nearly 1.5 miles of the Fort River passes through open woodland habitat, which hosts some rare and endangered species. Visitors already find it an excellent birding location.

Proximity to several apartment complexes off East Hadley Road and the neighborhoods of Orchard Valley provides an opportunity to create a public park that’s within walking distance of hundreds of residents. Existing cart paths could become walking trails that access much of the area. Other ideas for Hickory Ridge’s next life include new nature trails, connections to nearby Pomeroy Village Center, wildlife habitat restoration, and the creation of pollinator habitat along the Fort River.

As part of a master planning process, the Town is seeking input from the public on how to re-imagine and make use of this important open space. You can offer your ideas online. (See links at right.)

By partnering with communities, Kestrel helps make it possible to create public lands that benefit people, while also protecting our natural resources in the Valley.

Give Your Input! Holyoke and Amherst are currently seeking public feedback online.

➤ Hickory Ridge https://engageamherst.org/hickory
➤ Anniversary Hill holyoke.org/scott-tower-and-anniversary-hill-park-community-survey

Enter into the Picture.
AS MORE PEOPLE HAVE BEEN SPENDING time outdoors, our stewardship team is creating new public trails and enhancing others. Making a conservation area welcoming to visitors takes many hands, and lately those hands have been busy!

**Whately Center Woods**

Just a half-mile down the road from the historic center of Whately, a beloved neighborhood woodland will be ready for the public to enjoy in the new year. Thanks to the hard work of 32 volunteers from our Woodworking and Land & Trail Crews, the Whately Center Woods has a new trail that takes visitors along wetland boardwalks and over picturesque streams into the woods. Alongside contractors from Conservation Works LLC, volunteers constructed 400 feet of bog bridges, 50 feet of boardwalk, two bridges, and a staircase. The finishing touch, a kiosk at the new parking area on Chestnut Plain Road, will provide a map highlighting features along the trail.

Grace Goodwin-Boyd, Kestrel’s Terra-Corps Stewardship Coordinator said, “Our volunteers have been vital to the success of this trail project. Everyone I’ve worked with has been friendly, contributing to what has been a massive group effort. I’m excited for this trail to be open so that the community can enjoy the beautiful, peaceful place we’ve been working in for the past two months.”

**Mt. Tom North: Little Mountain**

In a partnership with the City of Easthampton, Kestrel helped conserve two adjacent parcels to create a 23-acre park that will serve as the City’s first secure public access to Mt. Tom. This fall, the City began constructing a new parking area on East Street, and restoring an open meadow at the top of the hill that will provide scenic views of the Oxbow.

A universally accessible trail is under construction on the City’s 12-acre parcel, as well as trail connections to the New England Scenic Trail on Mt. Tom State Reservation. On Kestrel’s 11-acre parcel, a new family-friendly woodland trail is being marked. It will hug the base of Little Mountain, a knob on the Mt. Tom Range, and eventually connect to the trails the City is constructing. The new park should be open to the public by next summer.

**Ames Pond: A New Kestrel Retreat**

As a result of Julian Janowitz’s generous bequest to Kestrel of 143 acres around the scenic Ames Pond, our team is working to create a welcoming experience for all on this Shutesbury land. They have started sprucing up the upland trails by blazing and clearing debris. But there is much more work to be done on the 5-mile trail system, including repair of the bog boardwalk originally built by Julian.

In 2022, we’ll be applying for Community Preservation Act funds for the first phase of trail improvements, including an expanded parking area and a universally accessible meadow trail to a pond viewing platform near one of Julian’s sculptures.
What The Valley Means to Me

Randi Stein lives in Amherst and has been a Kestrel member since 2015.

How long have you lived in the Pioneer Valley?
I had visited the area for several summers, attending week-long Contemplative Dance workshops at Hampshire College. I remember looking at the hills in the distance, and promising myself to return one day. In 2005, I moved to the Valley from southern New Hampshire.

What do you love about the Valley?
The hills, the unique combination of a beautiful rural landscape, the dozens of farms which supply me with nutritious food, the colleges which contribute to the rich cultural landscape, and the rich artistic community.

How do you like to spend time outdoors?
I walk in the fields and woods, climb the hills, swim in the pond. I also garden, draw, and photograph, photograph, photograph. All of this with friends who enjoy the same things.

What is your favorite place to spend time outdoors?
I like walking along the Hadley dike on the Connecticut River, in fields around Larch Hill Conservation Area in Amherst and Mt. Sugarloaf. The view of the Valley from the top says it all!

What about Kestrel’s mission resonates with you?
I value quiet, beauty, and the land which contributes to my sense of inner balance, mental equilibrium, and sensory pleasure.

Complete this sentence: "I give to Kestrel Land Trust because…"
I am so glad that there is an organization that is doing the work I value and cannot do myself.

IN YOUR OWN WORDS

Volunteer Voices
Stephen G. Tilley

I taught ecology, evolution, and biodiversity at Smith College from the early 1980s until early 2000s when I retired. I have studied herpetology (reptiles and amphibians) most of my career, focusing my research on salamanders.

Kestrel reached out to me in 2019 and I led my first vernal pools guided walk for Kestrel that spring. I enthusiastically support Kestrel’s work and getting to lead field trips again. That was one of the best parts of my job before I retired from teaching.

I enjoy showing people natural places and native species in the Valley, especially spectacular, beautiful creatures, like Spotted Salamanders. They live long and complicated lives in our forests and wetlands without most people knowing that they even exist. Showing someone a big salamander with big, round yellow spots down its back is always a kick.

I also really enjoy interacting with the sorts of folks who are motivated to attend Kestrel’s nature walks. I like to think that I’ve helped them appreciate the Valley’s biodiversity and ecology.

Steve is one of many dozens of knowledgeable people from around the Valley who have helped Kestrel to create informative natural and cultural history events. We are grateful to all of those who donate their time to share their expertise with our community.

Share Your Valley Story! Tell us what you love about the Valley and why you support our work. Go to kestreltrust.org/connect/share/
Wishing you all the joys of nature and a Happy New Year.

Photo by Patrick Zephyr

Build a brighter future for the people and places you love.

No matter what your financial situation, a will is a powerful way to take care of the people you love for the future. Kestrel Land Trust has partnered with FreeWill to provide a free online tool that can help you write your will in 20 minutes or less.

A will can also help you protect the forests, farms, and trails that you love—at no cost to you—so they’ll be there for future generations.

Start your will today at Freewill.com/KestrelLandTrust

Cover Artist Spotlight

Meg Bandarra

Softly We Go OIL PAINTING

I’m a landscape painter who also has limited mobility, and I rely on accessible trails to go into the woods. I have a deep connection to the natural world, so I’ve always loved being outside. It wasn’t until my access to nature became limited that I truly understood how healing and soul-rejuvenating these spaces are. That’s why I’m an advocate for unpaved accessible trails. Everyone—including seniors, families with small children, and people with limited mobility—deserves access to nature. Together these groups represent 30-47% of our population, and all can benefit from the safer, easier access that unpaved accessible trails provide.

To see more of Meg’s artwork, visit megbandarra.com. To learn more about her accessible trail advocacy, go to unpavedtrailsforall.org

Photo by Patrick Zephyr