

FALL 2023

# THE BNRC Report



BERKSHIRE NATURAL RESOURCES COUNCIL

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# THE BNRC Report

## FALL 2023

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## WHAT DOES THE LAND NEED FROM US NOW?

I wish things could go back to the way they used to be.

Have you had that same thought? Back when things were simpler, or the earth was greener.

For many of us, the ideal is how it was when we were children, or perhaps even longer ago than that.

I hear this wish sometimes when talking about land in the Berkshires—can't we keep it the way it always was? Or return it to its pristine state?

But here's the thing. Your ideal state may be different from your neighbor's. Was it in, say, the 1960s, when the land was less developed, but before we had the Clean Water and Clean Air Acts? The 1850s, when the entire Berkshires were cleared of forest for farmland? Or the 1680s, when the Mohican people lived on and stewarded the land, ensuring its health for wildlife and people?

Whatever your ideal, we can't "return to checkpoint" like a video game. The landscape is constantly changing, and changes on its own—fields grow into forests, trees fall, beavers build dams, rivers carve out new courses. Today, even in the most pristine areas, we have to contend with outside forces—invasive plants, the lack of apex predators like wolves.

Instead of turning back the clock, our job is to look ahead: What does the land need from us now? What is the healthiest state we can steward—for plants and pollinators, animals, birds, fish—and us?

That's our task.

Warmly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jenny".

Jenny Hansell, President  
[jhansell@bnrc.org](mailto:jhansell@bnrc.org)



P.S. You may notice the title of this publication changed. Since 2016, it was called The Landkeeper's Report. While to some, "keeper" invokes caring for something greater than ourselves, (like Riverkeeper in New York) to many it smacked of exclusivity, as if we were locking up and keeping land away from people. Since our goal is exactly the opposite—we open land so people can enjoy it—we have removed Landkeeper from our logo and publications. Over time you'll see it gradually disappear from road signs and trails.

# BERKSHIRE FARMS FOREVER

Generous, multigenerational, community-minded farmers are building environmental and social resilience in the Berkshires.

Sharon Wyrrick started Many Forks Farm, in Clarksburg, in 2012. Using a Community Supported Agriculture farm share model, she offers seasonal shares of vegetables for weekly pick-up June through October. Members can pick herbs, flowers, and berries and are welcome to walk the farm trail to observe wildlife and enjoy the beautiful views.

Sharon's plan was to farm for a decade or so, and then convey the farm to some then-unknown farmer, whom serendipity would deliver.

Last year, she met Molly Comstock, who had been looking for a secure location for her successful Colfax Farm. Like so many farmers, Molly has struggled with the skyrocketing cost of farmland, which threatens traditions of farming and local food in the Berkshires.

It is an understatement to say farmland is growing more expensive. In fact, Massachusetts currently has the fastest-rising farmland prices in the United States.

A generation of Berkshire farmers are aging out of the profession. Many have a need to fund retirement or provide for heirs, and ample potential to sell their farmland for residential or commercial uses. Younger farmers struggle to secure farmland at reasonable prices. This combination creates a tremendous threat to the culture of local food in the Berkshires, community health, and food security, all amid climate change, which has severe impacts on farmland.

**The Berkshire Farms Fund:** BNRC has long helped farmers conserve their land and now, together with generous community members, we are launching the Berkshire Farms Fund. Many Forks is the first farm BNRC will purchase in advance, protect with permanent agricultural conservation restrictions, then sell to a new farmer. Through the Fund, BNRC will provide a critical bridge, keeping the farm in agriculture forever and enabling a new farmer to get a foothold with the support to succeed.

Molly is thrilled to be considered as the next caretaker of these lands, to which Sharon has



"Farms in the 5–10-acre size with diversified vegetable production have the flexibility and adaptability to withstand the changes of our times: climate change, market instability, supply chain disruptions, and more." —farmer Molly Comstock



applied regenerative agriculture practices focused on cultivating nutrient-dense food, building soil health, and sequestering carbon.

From Sharon's vision to Molly's readiness, and with people like you who choose to buy CSA shares or donate to farmer-support efforts, together, we can protect the future of Berkshire farmers and farming, one farm at a time.

To donate to BNRC's Berkshire Farms Fund, visit [bnrc.org/bff](https://bnrc.org/bff). 

# TRAILS BUILT TO LAST

## Carefully Designed Sustainable Trails are Better for People, and for the Forest

At the height of the torrential rains and flooding in the summer of 2023, BNRC received surprisingly few calls about washed-out or flooded trails.

Why? Sustainable trail design.

On a recent walking tour of a new High Road route under development in Great Barrington, BNRC Stewardship Director Doug Brown and High Road Manager Deanna Smith explained the difference between a poorly designed trail and a sustainable one. As it is now, the existing path is covered with water in places, muddy in others, and full of rocks and tree roots. Several bridges are badly in need of repair or replacement.

By rerouting sections, changing the out slope (see glossary), covering exposed roots with soil, and replacing bridges, the new trail will not only be a more pleasant walk appropriate for people of varying ages and abilities, it will be more likely to withstand more extreme weather.

"Great trail building starts at the design phase," says Deanna, who previously owned a trail-building company that worked all over the country. "Considering sustainability by thinking through the grade, turning radii, and soil composition, is the

critical first step." She adds, "It is much easier to design a trail with sustainability and user groups in mind from the beginning than it is to try to retrofit a poorly designed trail afterward."

**Protecting wildlife and forest integrity:** Well-designed trails are not just good for people, says BNRC Trails Manager Tyler Fogg, they are good for the forest. Trails can focus human interaction with the forest, directing people away from areas that need to be left alone.

And, many large tracts of land are crisscrossed with social trails that evolved with little concern for wetlands, vernal pools, or other sensitive habitat. Washouts and gullies are increasingly common on old logging roads, leading to erosion and degradation of the surrounding habitat. A well-designed trail avoids these problems.

Careful design doesn't necessarily mean the trail is a gentle hike. While BNRC is increasingly focused on accessible trails like those at The Old Mill, Thomas and Palmer, and Parsons Marsh reserves, many routes, including new High Road routes, will be rugged and challenging. Nonetheless, they will be built to last. 🌲

Left: Once complete, this culvert will be virtually invisible to hikers, diverting water running down the hill to keep the trail from washing out.

Right: While a sustainably designed trail needs less maintenance, some details need frequent monitoring. The gravel tread leading onto the bridges at Old Mill compacts under foot traffic, and needs to be replenished periodically to ensure wheelchairs can traverse the bridge. Here, Tyler is improving that connection between the bridge and the tread with an additional plank.



## Glossary of Trail Terms

**Tread or Treadway**—the walking surface of the trail. At the Old Mill Trail it's "3/8 plus-minus" which means any gravel that can pass through a 3/8" sieve.

**Bench Cut**—A method of trail construction employed when building into the side of a slope. This involves excavating the width of the tread into the side of the hill, until the stable soil is reached. The soil is compacted and sloped to create the tread's surface.

**Out Slope**—The pitch or angle of the trail's tread from the inside to the outside edge, where the outside edge is lower than the inside edge. Allows for water to disperse quickly from the trail's surface to minimize runoff and erosion.

**Alignment**—the exact route marked out by flags before construction.

**Crib Wall**—A retaining wall, typically built from stone, built on the downslope side of a trail to keep the tread from collapsing. Often employed on steep side slopes where bench cutting is not feasible.



Deanna Smith showing BNRC staff and board members what not to do, on a future High Road route that will connect Fountain Pond to the route at Community Health Programs and eventually, downtown Great Barrington. As extreme weather events become more common, careful trail design to avoid situations like this becomes even more important.

## BE A BNRC CHAMPION!

BNRC seeks 10 enthusiasts to serve as **BNRC Champions**—volunteers who recruit new BNRC donors for conservation, wildlife, farmers, climate, and free access to the Berkshire outdoors.

Participation isn't difficult or awkward. You're in a good position to help if you have:

- A smartphone, tablet, laptop, or computer
- Social media accounts and/or an email address

Helping out takes only a few clicks and isn't much different from the kind of outreach one might do for a walk-a-thon or 5k fundraiser (but no walking or running required!)

**Learn more:** Contact Kathleen Smolinski at [ksmolinski@bnrc.org](mailto:ksmolinski@bnrc.org) or 413-377-9008



## AUTUMN OUTINGS SAMPLER

If you judge by traffic on the trails, the Berkshire outdoors are at their best in autumn. Happily, there is room for all. Whether your aim is blissful solitude or outings with other enthusiasts nearby, steep ridgetop climbs, or easy foliage strolls, there is a BNRC reserve that's perfect for your purpose.



### Constitution Hill | Lanesborough



This 303-acre reserve got its name for the bonfire lit here in 1788 to signal to area residents that Massachusetts had ratified the new proposed U.S. Constitution. Walk the Constitution Hill Trail (moderate difficulty) to find the Constitution Oak, a large rock outcrop, and the summit. The Field Trail (easier) has great views of Mount Greylock. This reserve is undergoing improvement planning, so expect more trail opportunities soon. *Follow Bridge Street in Lanesborough west about 0.8 miles to its end at the BNRC trailhead and kiosk. Construction detour: Putnam Road off Main Street, right on Meadow Lane, left on Bridge Street.*

### Hoosac Range | North Adams



A 3-mile ridge trail (6 miles roundtrip) atop the Berkshires' northeastern wall. The trail passes several dramatic vistas before reaching 180-degree views into Vermont. A shorter hike on the Sunset Rock loop, 1.6 miles roundtrip, also has great views overlooking North Adams. The trail to Spruce Hill is a strenuous hike due to length and terrain. The Sunset Rock portion is moderate due to elevation change. Winter comes early to Hoosac Range—be prepared! *Take Route 2 east from North Adams. Find the parking area on your right, just past the hairpin turn and the Wigwam Western Summit gift shop and café.*

### Old Mill Trail | Hinsdale/Dalton



This forested riverside trail is great for people of all abilities. The first 0.7 miles of the out-and-back route is designed for strollers, walkers, wheelchairs, and anyone who enjoys an easy path. Some will choose to cross Route 8 and continue another 0.8 miles, where you get to walk on stones right atop the river with a bit of water jumping up to kiss your boots. *From the center of Dalton: take Route 8 South to the Hinsdale town line. Continue 0.4 miles to a left on Old Dalton Road. The trailhead parking is the first, immediate left.*



Support the Berkshire outdoors.  
[bnrc.org/donate](https://bnrc.org/donate)



### Alford Springs | Alford




This big-woods reserve allows for short to all-day adventures. Trails vary from moderate to difficult, and all feature vistas. On the Father Loop one can see Greylock Mountain on a clear day. Several intermittent streams tumble down to feed Alford Brook and the Green River. Abundant white birch trees make this reserve even more magical. Disappear into this expansive forest at peak foliage for the best of the Berkshire outdoors. *Driving directions are complicated, but worth it! Visit [bnrc.org/alfordsprings](http://bnrc.org/alfordsprings) for details.*

### Bob's Way | Monterey/Sandisfield



Named for the Berkshire conservationist Nion Robert Thieriot, who knew this corner of the Berkshires particularly well. The forest, ponds, and wetlands here are home to porcupines and otters, among other mammals. You might glimpse one of the beavers that keep these marshy areas flooded to create prime habitat for other wildlife. Three marked trails allow for hikes of 1.75 to 2.5 miles (moderate difficulty due to uneven footing and elevation changes). *The trailhead is on Route 23 in Monterey, between Mount Hunger Road and the Monterey/Otis town line.*

### THAT'S NOT ALL!

These are only five of the nearly 60 BNRC reserves across the Berkshires that are free and open to everybody, thanks to donors. See all BNRC reserves at [bnrc.org/reserves](http://bnrc.org/reserves). Or download the BNRC Berkshire Trails app at [bnrc.org/app](http://bnrc.org/app). 

**PARKING LOT FULL?** Please don't park on the road. Try the **BNRC Trails App** to find a nearby alternative!



# BRIDGING THE GAPS

A Partnership with the City of Pittsfield  
Highlights BNRC Values in Action

Bridges are how we get from one side to another, crossing a stream, a river, or a gorge. They also connect people. They facilitate access. They open new opportunities.



Through past partnerships with the City of Pittsfield, BNRC knew that the 36-foot bridge at Wild Acres Park had deteriorated, making it unsafe and unusable. Mariah Fogg, BNRC's Community Conservation Manager, approached the City to offer support. She learned that, while the City had funding for materials, it needed a partner to design, build, and install the bridge, and dismantle the old

structure. BNRC was eager to help, as partnerships with Pittsfield and the many towns, organizations, and state agencies we work with to protect our open lands are meaningful and important.

The project began with an assessment in September 2022. Josh Hopmans, BNRC's Property Manager, supported the bridge's design, construction, and on-site planning. The bridge was deconstructed in November, and construction began in BNRC's workshop in March 2023. Locally sourced black locust—a dense wood known for its ability to withstand the elements—was fashioned into seven 200-lb. structural supports for the bridge platform and railings. A team of five BNRC volunteers (David Dutra, Tim O'Brien, Wendy Stebbins, Bob Johnson, and Susan LeBourdais) supported this effort.

The new bridge was installed over two workdays at Wild Acres. The first was overseen by Tyler Fogg, BNRC's Trails Manager, who is also certified in using a Griphoist and rigging equipment. Cables were affixed around large trees to enable the safe placement of the bridge supports. Using straps and hooks, each support was lifted from the truck bed and guided to its resting place before being secured onto the beams.

The second workday involved installing pre-cut locust planking for the bridge's walkway, railings, and top pieces. BNRC exhibited a great amount of trust in the ability of volunteers to help with this project! The team on site included BNRC's Volunteer and Outreach Coordinator Charlotte Hood, who was instrumental in facilitating communications with the volunteers and inspiring confidence along the way.

This project lived up to BNRC's core values in many ways. It strengthened connections between people—the volunteers, the staff, and the City of Pittsfield and visitors to Wild Acres. It facilitated access to open spaces, and it opened new opportunities—for volunteers to give back, and for those new to the outdoors to experience the wonder of nature. 🌿

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*This article is adapted from our "Bridging the Gaps" blog post written by BNRC volunteer Susan LeBourdais and has been repurposed with her permission. Read Susan's full blog article at [bnrc.org/blog](https://bnrc.org/blog).*





## PLANNING THE HIGH ROAD

Field Notes from BNRC's High Road Manager, Deanna Smith

My map guides me to an opening beneath the ridgeline, and I enter a basin of towering stone ledges that surround me like an amphitheater. Gravity has been at work here, casting pieces from the walls into the boulder-filled chasm where I stand.

I scramble over fragments of rock, careful not to step into one of the many crevices concealed beneath the thin layer of moss that connects between them like fascia. I stop for a moment atop an elevated slab, looking toward the surrounding sheer cliffs. I envision the future trail that will carve its way through this seemingly impenetrable field of debris. I imagine hikers marveling at the walls of ancient strata, looming high above even the largest trees, which have grown tall in their quest to compete for the limited sunlight on this side of the ridge.

But I am not here to imagine. I am here to collect data.

This will be one of the most logistically challenging sections of what will ultimately become a new section of The High Road. And so, I want to get an accurate measurement, since this will inform the design work which will follow. That means walking—as best as I can—over the lattice of fallen trees and car-sized boulders.

Typically, I'd use a survey wheel to measure the length of a proposed trail section, but that isn't practical here. A GPS track will have to suffice. I pull a piece of fluorescent pink flagging tape from my pack and tie it around the trunk of a beech sapling. This is one of many pieces of tape that will mark the location of the trail.

Trail planning is as much of an art as it is a science; it's where objective metrics like "rise-over-run" meet subjective qualities like "flow" and "scenic value." There are innumerable factors to consider, such as feasibility, grade, soil composition, accessibility; the list goes on.

It takes more than a bit of optimism to imagine a trail could ever be built here. But experience has told me that not only will it be possible, but that the finished product will be well worth the effort. With trails—as with life—sometimes the hardest won battles have the greatest payoff.

The irony of trail planning is that it involves a great deal of hiking where there is no trail. You can only get so far drawing lines on a map. The real work happens outside, in the elements. This year, those have included some of the highest rates of rainfall on record and more mosquitoes than I can recall in recent memory.

While my appetite for field work waned a bit in late summer and early fall, I remind myself that in a few short months, muggy afternoons spent outside will be replaced by many weeks in the office. The days will be shorter, colder, and uncondusive for this type of work. I have no doubt I'll be wistfully counting the days until the snow melts, revealing the flagging tape that has been patiently waiting beneath it, and looking forward to discovering the next new High Road section. Maybe the mosquitos aren't so bad after all. 🦟

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*Before joining BNRC to map out The High Road, Deanna founded a trail design and construction company that allowed her to work on a multitude of trail development initiatives both locally and across the country.*

# HISTORIC PARTNERSHIP IN STOCKBRIDGE

Stockbridge-Munsee regaining access to 351 acres of homeland.



Photo: Douglas Brown

Over two hundred years ago, the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohicans was forced off their homeland, now known as the Berkshires and Hudson Valley, where they and their ancestors lived for thousands of years. After many years and more forced removals, the Tribe relocated to a reservation in Wisconsin and refused to move any further. They never lost their connection to the Berkshires, always returning to conduct official business or reconnect to their homelands. Now the northern edge of Monument Mountain will once again be stewarded by the tribe.

In August, Massachusetts Lieutenant Governor Kim Driscoll announced the award of a \$2.26 million grant from the Commonwealth's Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness program (MVP) to support the Stockbridge-Munsee's purchase of the property and implementation of a stewardship plan to ensure the land is protected as a nature-based solution for climate change resiliency.

Stockbridge-Munsee President Shannon Holsey said, "We are creating a paradigm shift in how society invests in tribal nations by grounding an investment strategy in Indigenous systems thinking, recognizing the interconnectedness of all things and our responsibilities to our homelands and each other."

**Collaborative Effort:** When BNRC learned that this land, known as Fenn Farm, was for sale, Beth Mills, BNRC's Director of Land Conservation, convened a working group including the Trustees of Reservations, Stockbridge Land Trust, Laurel Hill Association, the

Town of Stockbridge, MassWildlife, and Stockbridge-Munsee Tribal Council, Conservation, and Cultural Affairs Department, to explore conservation possibilities and facilitate discussion between the landowners, their agents, and the Federally Recognized Tribal Nation. When the Tribe decided to pursue ownership, BNRC and these partners worked together to support them.

"We often provide 'assists' for large conservation projects, but this is unlike anything BNRC has ever been involved in," said BNRC President Jenny Hansell. "I could not be more delighted that, by convening the partners and providing legal and grant-writing support, we were able to 'assist' in this historic and important return of the Tribe's homeland."

Holsey told the *Berkshire Eagle* that the project is "the reclamation of our kinship systems, our governance systems, our ceremony and spiritually, our language, our culture, and our food and medicinal systems. Those are all based on our relationship to the land."

"Land trusts across the country are grappling with the complicated history of conservation," says Mills. "Land ownership itself is part of our colonialist past. People of color, and indigenous people here in the Berkshires, have been systematically and intentionally shut out from access to the land and the ability to maintain their cultural values associated with the land and the environment. For BNRC to be able to support the righting of this injustice is an honor." 🌿

# Many Ways to Give Generously

For conservation, wildlife, farms, outdoor access,  
and climate resilience in the Berkshires

BNRC donors are using these savvy donation methods.  
**Is one of these right for you?**

Do you have a **Donor Advised Fund**? BNRC gratefully receives many DAF grant disbursements. Some qualify for matching funds from [halfmydaf.com](https://www.halfmydaf.com). Set up a disbursement with your fund administrator today!

Donating **stock** is a high-impact, tax-advantaged way to protect the natural beauty and ecological integrity of the Berkshires. **Get started at [bnrc.org/givestocks](https://bnrc.org/givestocks).**

If you are 73 or older, you can make a tax-free **donation from your IRA**, and even meet your required minimum distribution (RMD). Your plan administrator or financial advisor can help you set up a plan that's right for you!

You can help conserve the Berkshires at ZERO COST today through a **bequest**. BNRC partners with an online provider that helps you create your legal will for free (or draft a will for review with an attorney). See [freewill.com/bnrc](https://freewill.com/bnrc).

**Donate cryptocurrency.** Crypto donors typically avoid capital gains tax, are able to deduct the full amount of their donation. **Be part of BNRC's crypto team at [bnrc.org/donatecrypto](https://bnrc.org/donatecrypto).**

*None of the above is financial or tax advice. Always consult with a professional, certified financial advisor before making any financial decision.*

Of course, most donors contribute cash, which helps enormously for everything we accomplish together through BNRC.



See all the ways you can be part of the BNRC donor team, including online giving, at [bnrc.org/donate](https://bnrc.org/donate).

**Thank you for everything you do to care for the Berkshire outdoors!**

Questions? Contact Rich Montone at [rmontone@bnrc.org](mailto:rmontone@bnrc.org), or 413-499-0596 x114



Photo left: Christina Lane Photography



# Berkshire Natural Resources Council

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# BERKSHIRE FARMS Forever

**TOGETHER**, we can protect the future of Berkshire farmers and farming, one farm at a time. Read more about our new project in Clarksburg on page 3.

