

SPRING 2025

THE BNRC Report



BERKSHIRE NATURAL RESOURCES COUNCIL

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THE BNRC Report

SPRING 2025

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**Berkshire Natural
Resources Council**

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Letter from the President

A SPECIAL PLACE A CRUCIAL MOMENT



It's not often that we open a whole new reserve. The new Tom Ball Mountain Reserve is something to celebrate.

As you'll read in this issue of the BNRC Report, this project has been developing for over 20 years. That's not unusual for conservation projects—when a landowner is considering the future of their land—what they want their legacy to be—they may need years, or decades, to make the final decision.

Nine miles long, Tom Ball Mountain was the last major ridgeline in Berkshire County with no public access. BNRC's then-Director of Conservation, Narain Schroeder, saw the potential, and worked patiently, at the speed of trust, with more than eleven landowners and farmers, in three towns.

The result is nearly 1,000 acres of land protected forever, a new three-mile trail loop opening this summer, and a High Road leg in the future. Fantastic!

Many of you have asked me whether and how BNRC is being affected by the cuts coming down from Washington. The gutting of the EPA, the slashing of funds for farmers, the undoing of all of President Biden's climate initiatives, and so much more are going to have devastating impact on all of us. BNRC has not yet had to cut any programs, although some of the conservation projects we are currently looking at depend on some federal funding so their future is in doubt.

What will keep us steady? You. BNRC is community-funded. Your donations keep us going. We cannot back off our commitment to a healthy ecosystem for all, and your support drives our work.

Speaking of commitments: our goals of inclusiveness, to broadening access to nature, and to creating a sense of belonging for everyone on the trails is not changing—these are integral to our values and our strategic plan goals.

Thank you for keeping the work going!

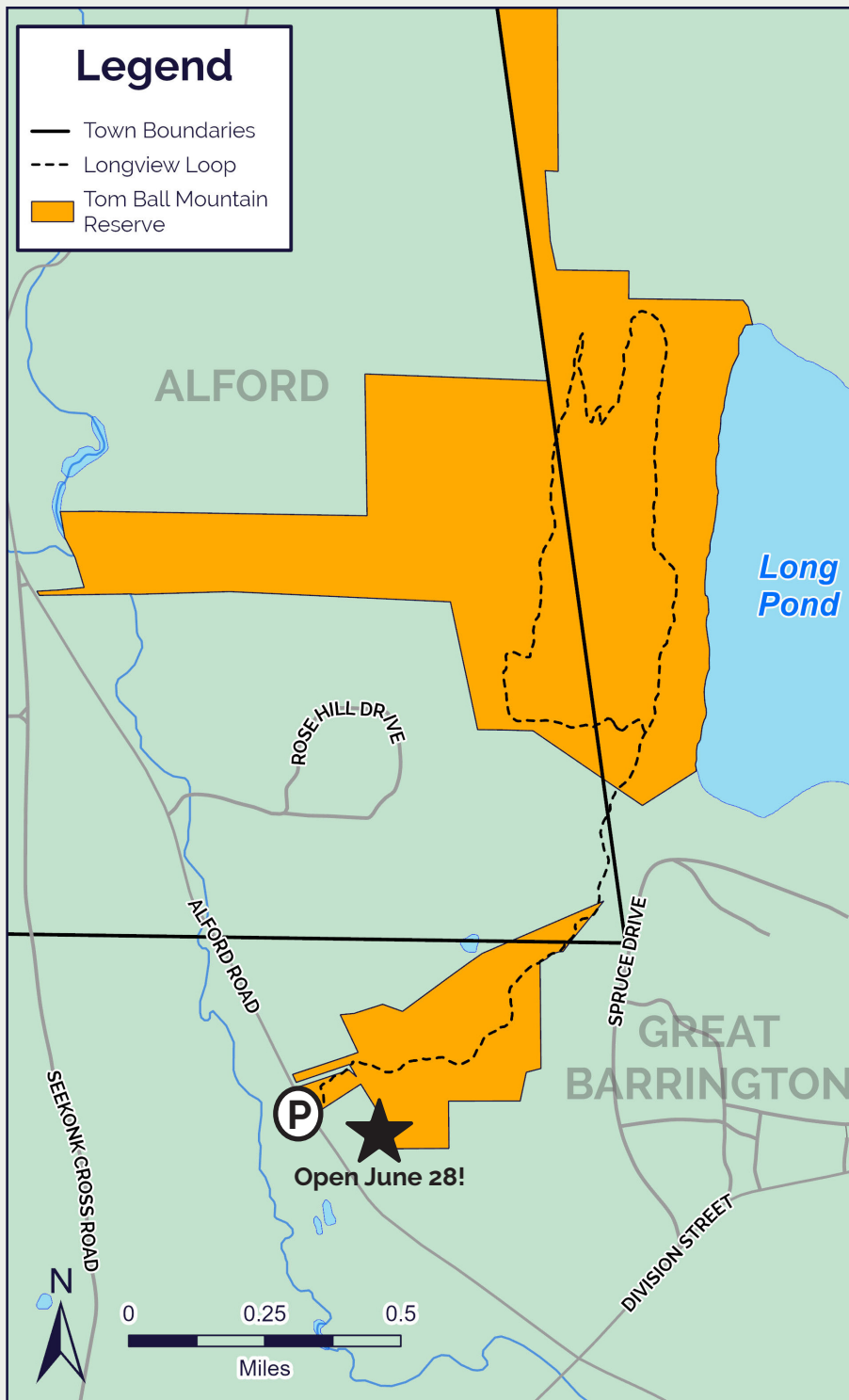
See you at Tom Ball!

Jenny Hansell, President
jhansell@bnrc.org

BNRC REPORT SPECIAL ISSUE:

Tom Ball Mountain Reserve

Introducing Berkshire County's newest reserve, opening in summer 2025.



Located off Alford Road in Great Barrington, the first section of this reserve to open will include three-miles of trail. The lollipop shaped Longview Loop Trail, climbs the southern end of Tom Ball Mountain and parallels Long Pond. Extending north, the full 929-acre reserve reaches into West Stockbridge, with future plans for additional trails and access.

READ ON TO LEARN MORE

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TWENTY YEARS IN THE MAKING: CONSERVING A NATURE RESERVE

It takes knowledgeable staff, an array of experts and visionary donors.



A segment of the new Longview Loop trail.

A story like this doesn't begin with trails or maps or kiosks—it starts with a conversation. Or when someone, walking their land as they have done for decades, begins to wonder what will happen to it when they are gone.

It can be years, if not decades, from that first conversation to the opening of a new reserve. The story of Tom Ball Mountain Reserve began more than 20 years ago.

A Vision Takes Shape

"Tom Ball is one of the defining ridge lines in the southern Berkshires, and prior to 2003, none of it was conserved or accessible to the public," recalls Narain Schroeder, BNRC's then-Director of Conservation.

The first steps came when Narain started chatting with Jim Barbieri, owner of a small lumber mill, about conserving his parcel at the south end of the mountain. Jim wasn't in a rush, but he had a vision.



One conversation, at Jim Barbieri's hardware store back in 2003, led to over 11 landowners conserving 1,245 acres with a total value of over \$10 million."

Over the next few years, neighbors owning three parcels—passionate about the place they called home—took action. Jon Piasecki and Laura Gratz were the first to work with BNRC to place a conservation restriction* (CR) on their property. Jane and her husband Channing Murdock, an early BNRC board member who loved watching locals wander into their backyard on Long Pond Road, soon followed suit. In 2006, Jeanne Vanecko donated a CR. The north end of the mountain was starting to take shape.

The Next Big Steps

In 2018 the conserved acreage grew, extending up to West Stockbridge. Narain assisted John Springstube with placing an agricultural preservation restriction* (APR) on his farm, while at the same time working to close on the purchase of John's forested land. Nearby, Charlie Schulze,

What
will happen
to your land?
Contact
hello@bnrc.org
to explore
your options.

**February
2003**

First
conversation
with
Jim Barbieri

**December
2003**

Piasecki & Gratz
CR closes,
32 acres

**December
2004**

Murdock CR closes,
241 acres

**December
2006**

Vanecko
CR closes,
43 acres

Beginning
of work
with Barbieri
family

**March
2014**

Alan Clark, and Bob Mitchell sold their parcels to BNRC at less than their full value—all three were willing to leave money on the table, knowing their collective decisions would multiply a legacy.

After Jim Barbieri passed, his wife, Lynn Race Barbieri, wanted to fulfill his vision. But conservation isn't just about willing landowners—it's also about funding. BNRC launched a fundraising campaign to help purchase the Barbieri property, which brought in over \$370,000 from more than 50 individual donors, and the property closed in 2021.

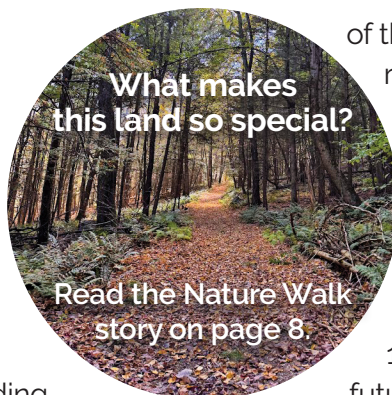
One of the most critical steps was connecting the north and south portions of the mountain. BNRC approached Jim Mercer, who was open to putting all of Round Pond into conservation. With that addition the total acreage of the project surpassed 500 acres.

One challenge remained: access. The reserve couldn't open without a way for people to get there. In 2023, the final puzzle piece clicked into place when BNRC acquired a small 2-acre parcel from Mike and Jean Parsons for a parking area, at last making the southern loop accessible to the public.

Over the course of two decades, eleven landowners have either donated or sold a CR or fee interest to create the reserve, using just about every land conservation strategy in the toolbox. Today, 929 acres, spanning three towns, have been conserved as part of the Tom Ball Mountain Reserve, with 316 additional acres protected under private CRs.

An Eye to the Future

For now, the official Tom Ball Mountain Reserve encompasses the southern half of the ridge. The new Longview Loop Trail, ascends the southern part



of the ridge, following the old carriage road and offering views of Long Pond. To ensure its sustainability over years of weather and wear, BNRC's Trail Crew designed and built all-new sections as well.

A single conversation at a hardware store in 2003 has led to over 1,000 acres of protected land. As the future unfolds, the heart of the mountain's story will remain the same, serving as a testament to relationships, vision, and dedication—proof that when a community loves their land, their decision to conserve it will resound for generations. 🌲

WHAT'S A CR?

***CR:** A landowner can place a conservation restriction, or CR, on their land, to protect its natural values forever, while retaining ownership of the land. It restricts development but can allow for other uses. It is a legal agreement, and it runs with the land through any future owners.

***APR:** Like a CR, an APR protects agricultural land from development and reserves its use specifically for farming. The farmer is paid for the development rights, usually from the state, and the restriction remains with the land forever.

Fee Land/Fee Interest: This refers to unrestricted land that is sold or donated directly to a land trust. The land trust fully owns the parcel and will put it into conservation status.

Bargain Sale: When fee land or a CR/APR is sold to a land trust for less than its fair market value. This enables the land trust to acquire more land, and offers a potential tax deduction to the landowner.

October 2018

BNRC acquires Schulze parcel, **83 acres**

November 2018

BNRC acquires Springstube forest parcel, **116 acres**

Fundraising campaign launch for Barbieri parcel

May 2019

May 2020

BNRC acquires Barbieri parcel, **221 acres**

April 2020

Springstube APR closes

October 2020

BNRC acquires Mitchell and Clark parcels, **147 acres**

THE LONGVIEW LOOP AT TOM BALL MOUNTAIN



From left: Tyler installing bridge decking; Seasonal Trail Crew staff bench cutting new trail and building water bars; Ernie the Gurney is a two person rock carrier, built by Tyler.

Trail building combines engineering with environmental science, ingenuity, and artistic vision, along with a large dose of people power. Developing a new reserve requires time spent getting to know the land, thoughtful planning and design, and consideration of the generations of people who came before us—and those who will walk these trails long after us.

Forest to Reserve

Work at Tom Ball Mountain began in 2023. Tyler Fogg, BNRC Assistant Director of Conservation, and BNRC Trail Crew Leader Jon Lueken hiked every inch of the land—studying water flow, wetland vegetation, and natural features to showcase. They spent months mapping potential routes, revising their plans through the seasons

to accommodate the land's natural changes.

"When building a new trail system," Tyler says, "we balance reasonable impacts with an investment in sustainability. We are building for the future." These values are evident in the blend of old woods roads and newly constructed trails, designed to respect natural systems and consider future impacts of climate change.

As the first signs of spring emerged in 2024, Jon and a skilled crew from Greenagers—a local environmental youth organization—worked 10-hour days, four days a week. Over three weeks, they reinforced the rustic stonework that holds up the old carriage road switchbacks which traverse the steep side of the mountain. This involved quarrying rocks from the hillside and using a mechanical grip hoist to "fly" rocks up to 2,000 pounds down the slope

**June
2021**

BNRC acquires Mercer parcel, **360 acres**

BNRC conveys CRs on Springstube, Mitchell, & Clark parcels to MassWildlife

Start
of reserve
and trail
planning

**December
2022**

**January
2023**

BNRC acquires Parsons parcel, **2 acres**

**June
2023**

Settlement of the AIER trail easement

MassWildlife purchases CR on Barbieri parcel

with precision and care into exact locations.

Since then, BNRC staff, teams from Greenagers, and volunteers have continued building bridges, clearing trails, and laying stones. Tyler also collaborated with a local wetland consulting firm to ensure environmental sustainability and meet wetland regulations and permitting.

Welcoming the Community

As spring 2025 unfolds, BNRC staff are putting the finishing touches on the trails—setting the last rock steps, building a water diversion bridge, compacting trails, hanging signs, and painting blazes. At the same time, a local contractor has begun work on the parking area, the final step needed before the reserve can welcome the public.

Jon reflects that he is very proud of what the team has accomplished. "There is a feeling of deep satisfaction in seeing the fruit of our labors and working to open a new reserve for everyone to enjoy." 🌲



Stair work in process at the Longview Loop.

STEWARDING TOM BALL MOUNTAIN RESERVE

Volunteers are integral to the care of BNRC reserves. Volunteer Trail Stewards commit to a reserve and are responsible for things like refilling maps, picking up garbage, and hiking the trails to clear small debris and report bigger issues.



Guides from Canyon Ranch preview Tom Ball Mountain Reserve.

The Outdoor Sports Guides at Canyon Ranch in Lenox have stepped up to steward Tom Ball Mountain Reserve. Guides Ethan Winslow and Tim Hickey speak on behalf of the team when they say "Most of us grew up in the Berkshires, and all of us have a deep appreciation for the natural world. Trail stewarding is meaningful as a way to participate locally in conservation and give back in a new way to the Berkshires that we all love."

November 2023

Start of the wetland permitting process

September 2024

Parking lot building permit approved

April 2024

Trail work construction begins

December 2024

Kiosk and map design begins



Summer 2025



Permanent stewardship and planning for the future

WALK THE LONGVIEW LOOP

Imagine yourself immersed in the sublime terrain of BNRC's newest reserve

By Jonathan Lueken, Trail Crew Leader



Photo: Aahnix Bathurst

Your journey begins as you tread uphill through a forest mixed with pine and hardwood trees. As you crest a hill, the forest changes to a dappled overhead canopy, lively birch, maple, and oak trees surround you.

Through the trees, look, you can catch glimmers of water—a rare vernal pool wetland reflecting light from above.

Walking onward, you enter a stately Hemlock grove and gently meander through the green boughs.



Photo: Hayley Gibbs

An eastern newt, a species that you're likely to see when visiting the reserve.

As the trail curves to the right, you discover a black birch tree with an unusual burl bulging out of the base. Its shape resembles a large human ear, or perhaps something of a wild fantasy.



Photo: Gabrielle K. Murphy

A male goldfinch stands out against the background of spring green.

As you continue upward a deer runs at the sound of your approach. Gray and red squirrels skitter up a tree and send down scolding chatter.

If you pause and listen, you may detect the drumming and calls of a variety of woodpeckers, or maybe a yellow-bellied sapsucker. Be sure to look down, you might spot an eastern newt as it wriggles away from your feet's vibration.

At the highest point the trail levels out. Look east from your commanding perch—you'll catch glimpses of Long Pond, Monument Mountain, and Beartown State Forest through the trees.

Further along you now join an old 1900's carriage road carved into the side of the ridge. At your feet, a weathered stone retaining wall supports the ground.



Photo: Aahnix Bathurst

With views into the canopy on the steep eastern slope, you might spot this scarlet tanager perched in a hemlock.



May you walk with deep appreciation for this new and beautiful reserve."

Navigating down the switchbacks—with their steep incline and zigzag turns—you notice a shift in the landscape. Above you, large boulders jut from the steep hillside. Dense populations of hemlock and chestnut oak trees shoot out of the vertical terrain.

When the steepest part of the descent is complete you land in a dreamy corridor of lush green ferns. Winding gently downhill, the trail enters a boulder field.

Stop here for a moment and admire the jumble of rock slabs and boulders, decorated in the varied greens of mosses and lichens. The ridge, towering above, is capped with verdant tree foliage, while below, vertical cliffs stand exposed.

Moving past the rocky cobble, you continue onto a wide trail running parallel to Long Pond. You notice where the forest floor has been scratched by a rambling flock of wild turkeys.

Traversing rolling hills, you cross over a stream. If you're quiet, you might hear a barred owl cooing softly "*whoo cooks for yoooo?*"

Finally, you approach the trailhead and the end of your journey through the wild woods. The light ahead is bright as you leave the shaded forest path. 🌲

Find a place to **GO WILD**

With 13,000 acres and 60+ miles of trails, BNRC reserves offer something for everybody. All locations throughout Berkshire County are free and open year-round from dawn to dusk, with options for all levels and abilities.

Find your perfect
outing at
bnrc.org/reserves.



ALL THANKS TO YOU

Whether it's time, land, or money, community support is the backbone of BNRC.

As a donor-funded organization, BNRC is reliant on a network of supporters to continue its mission to conserve and care for Berkshire lands, water, and wildlife.

The long-haul conservation of land on Tom Ball Mountain was no exception.

For Rob and Eileen Rominger of Alford, the decision to donate for the purchase of the Barbieri parcel of the mountain was simple. "We loved the vision of a reserve spanning all the way across the ridge. When the full extent of the project is complete, it will be a phenomenal trail and hike," said Rob.

Rob and Eileen both have a passion for land conservation, especially for preserving and connecting parcels of land to protect diverse flora and fauna, and migratory pathways. They support these efforts through contributions, and also through extensive volunteer work.

In total, the conservation of Tom Ball Mountain was funded by over 50 individual donors, many foundations and funding partners, government grants, and the unrestricted giving of folks across our community. The generous gifts of land by multiple landowners contributed to the larger portion of acreage conserved. And the tireless work of BNRC staff in coordination with hundreds of volunteer hours carries a project like this to completion and into the future.

To longtime BNRC volunteer and donor David Dutra the conservation of Tom Ball Mountain was another important win for the county.

"The preservation of a natural resource vital to the Berkshires will now be enjoyed by everyone," Dutra says. "The decades-long work of BNRC and other land conservancy groups ensure these



BNRC staff and volunteers at a trail workday. David Dutra pictured in center.

treasures will be open to the general public in perpetuity."

BNRC's efforts to conserve land, protect wildlife and diverse habitat, and ensure free access to the outdoors for everybody are ongoing, and **donor support remains critical.** 🌱

Support the Next Trail

Make a contribution today to safeguard our landscape tomorrow



bnrc.org/donate

Save the Date!



Saturday, June 28 and Sunday, June 29

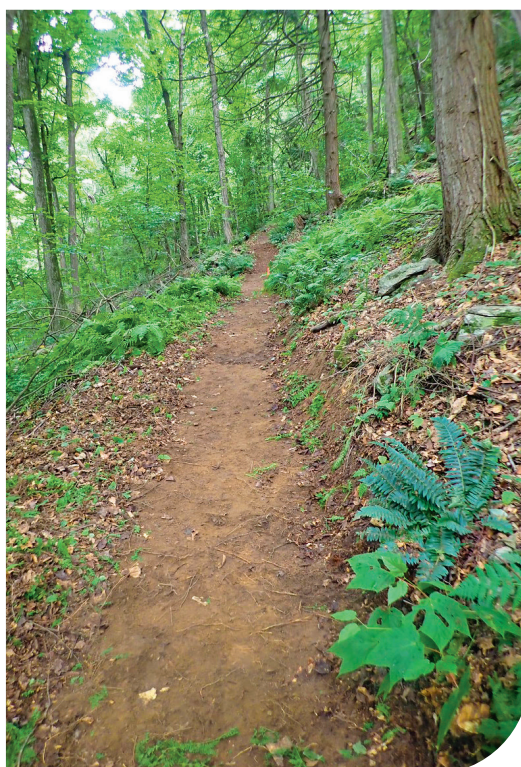


Join BNRC to celebrate the opening of the **Tom Ball Mountain Reserve** with a **free community celebration!**

Enjoy:

- Guided hikes of the Longview Loop
- Family-friendly activities celebrating nature, movement, and fun
- Self-guided hiking materials, so you can enjoy the trail at your own pace
- And more!

Details will be posted at bnrc.org/events.
For updates about BNRC directly to your inbox, including reminders and information about this event, subscribe to BNRC's e-newsletter at bnrc.org/get-involved/subscribe.





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