

Keeping Track: A Walk on the Wildlife Side

By Linda M. Bland

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If you are looking for a fun activity with purpose, how about a slow walk in the woods each season--looking for wildlife tracks and sign? You can learn the forest's most closely held secrets from a local expert and her organization: Keeping Track®.



Keeping Track® volunteers provide communities, land trust officials, and public agencies with answers that result in conservation by identifying and monitoring vital wildlife habitats and travel corridors for creatures like this bobcat.

The 14-year-old nonprofit group's **mission** is to inspire community participation in the long-term stewardship of wildlife habitat. They teach adults and children to observe, interpret, and record evidence of wildlife in their communities.

Keeping Track has trained over 1,575 volunteers across Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, New Mexico, Florida, Arizona, California, and Quebec. Data collected by these KTMP teams has conserved over 25,000 acres. **More than half these volunteers making lasting contributions to the preservation of wildlife habitat are over 50 years of age.**

Keeping Track's Founder-Director Susan C. Morse, 60, is a fourth generation forester, who has always been fascinated by and deeply fond of all animals, domestic and wild alike. She recalls feeling frustrated as a Jericho planning commissioner: "Our information was woefully inadequate to make decisions regarding land use."

State and federal agencies do not have the funding or the manpower to create wildlife habitat maps. Keeping Track volunteers provide communities, land trust officials, and public agencies with answers that result in conservation.

The process: Scientists and volunteers identify and monitor vital wildlife habitats and travel corridors. Groups gather this information using a scientific protocol developed by Keeping Track involving track and sign surveys. Keeping Track Teams collect and verify evidence of species along the same transects of land each season. The presence of wide-ranging mammals—deer, moose, bear, bobcat, fisher, otter—indicates larger unfragmented habitats with greater biodiversity.

61-year-old Bobbie Summers manages Keeping Track’s office, and serves as a volunteer and Board member: “My multi-faceted involvement with Keeping Track lets me continue a productive life style that is far more rewarding to me than retirement. For people over 50, this kind of service is good not just for the soul, but also the heart, muscles, and circulatory system.

“Sue gives citizens the tools to make scientifically accurate measurements and subsequent recommendations about habitat in their communities. When showing slides of bear, moose, and bobcat, Sue refers to them as “our neighbors.” Being a good neighbor to wildlife is what defines Keeping Track.”

63-year-old Judy Witters was so inspired by Keeping Track training she started her own group three years ago: “We are 10-12 strong and meet twice monthly, more in the winter. Most of us are in our 50s or 60s. If you ask any of us why we do it, we each say something different: for fun, for good cooking (we frequently breakfast together), to learn a skill--but mostly for the wonder of it all. When we ask ourselves what we are doing--in freezing weather and often on our hands and knees examining a track or sign--someone always says, ‘We are trying to learn the truth of where we live.’”

Richard Norman, 64, first heard Sue Morse talk about wildlife in 2000: “Her depth of knowledge of the natural world was breathtaking, and the eloquence with which she conveyed information was inspirational. After identifying the track of an animal, she explains the mechanics and physical attributes that created the track; the habitat that is attractive to this animal; its unique life cycle; and how it interacts with other animals.



“Keeping Track is a great activity for people over 50: It is physically and intellectually stimulating and makes any walk through the woods a lot more interesting.”

Sue Morse describes her fascination with wildlife this way: “I am most intrigued with where tracks can literally and figuratively lead us as we seek to understand wildlife ecology and make meaningful conservation planning decisions.”

Keeping Track is actively seeking new Board members. They will be especially delighted to hear from retired Vermonters who are passionate about wildlife and conservation.

How to get started: Call Bobbie Summers at Keeping Track (802-434-7000) or contact her at info@keepingtrack.org. Or write to POB 444 Huntington, VT 05462. The web site can provide background and a schedule of upcoming slide shows and field trips: www.keepingtrack.org.

Linda Bland completed Keeping Track’s Monitoring Program training; as an Advisory Board Member, she writes grants for Keeping Track.

