

**LANCASTER TOWN FOREST  
STEWARDSHIP PLAN  
February 2023**



*Lancaster Conservation Commission*

## **LANCASTER TOWN FOREST STEWARDSHIP PLAN**

*Approved by Lancaster Conservation Commission February 13, 2023*

*Approved by Lancaster Selectboard February 21, 2023*

### Overview

This Stewardship Plan for the Lancaster Town Forest lays out a framework for management and use of the Town Forest by Lancaster residents, Town departments and partner organizations. Developed by the Lancaster Conservation Commission (LCC), the plan prioritizes protection of the natural resource base and ecological functions of the Town Forest to insure it retains its value for generations to come.

The plan outlines four over-arching stewardship objectives and seven specific strategies for achieving them. The Conservation Commission will work in partnership with the Town Manager to engage and encourage Town departments, nonprofit partners and others to implement specific strategies. The Commission will track progress toward the objectives from year to year and adjust the Stewardship Plan accordingly.

### History of Town Forest

In the 1950's, three farms were combined to create a 260 +/- town-owned parcel. A management plan was created and tree planting followed. A town warrant article established the Town Forest in 1960. The primary use of the Town Forest since the 1970's has been timber harvesting. Several harvests have been conducted since 1974, the most recent in 2021-2022.

NH law allows for the establishment of Town Forest Commissions and provides for the designation of the Conservation Commission to oversee the Town Forest if a Forestry Commission doesn't exist. With only one Town Forest, Lancaster does not have a Forestry Commission. In 2022 the Town Manager and Selectboard agreed to a management structure designating the LCC to develop and implement a stewardship plan for the Town Forest.

Historically the Town Forest has been used primarily for timber harvest, hunting and trapping, wildlife viewing, walking and hiking. The trails around the Town Forest have been enjoyed by local residents for generations; they are especially important for residents in the village who don't have a car but would like to get out into nature. Over time they have degraded, making them difficult to find and follow, and creating problematic runoff and drainage into high-value wetlands.

### Ecological Overview

The Town Forest is located within a large, undeveloped and relatively unfragmented area that encompasses an 1,800-acre wetland complex between Page Hill Road, Grange Road and Causeway Street. The 273-acre Indian Brook Wetland begins in the northeast corner of Lancaster Town Forest. The Indian Brook flows along Causeway Street and ultimately enters the Connecticut River approximately 1,100 feet downstream from Baker Pond.

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The Lancaster Conservation Commission has had several studies conducted of the Town Forest and the surrounding Indian Brook watershed. These studies highlighted several themes that provide the basis for the objectives and strategies in this plan. These themes are listed below:

1. The Town Forest and surrounding wetland complexes include the highest value wetlands in Lancaster. Specifically, these wetland complexes are highly ranked for protecting aquifers which are critical sources of drinking water. The wetlands are also important for overall water quality, flood resilience and ecological integrity.
2. The Town Forest and surrounding parcels include state-and regionally significant wildlife habitat and several rare species.
3. The headwaters of the Indian Brook wetlands are located in the town, ultimately flowing directly into the Connecticut River.
4. The Town Forest is part of a large, unfragmented forest block contributing to excellent largescale connectivity for wildlife movement across the Connecticut River valley from the Northeastern Highlands of Vermont to the heights of the Killkenny Range. The high quality of the wetland complexes and wildlife habitat is directly related to the remote location and lack of fragmentation and disturbance.
5. The Town Forest should be managed to a) preserve the current high functionality of the wetlands and highly ranked wildlife habitat, b) protect ecologically sensitive areas, and c) enable resident enjoyment while being mindful of priority natural resource and wildlife values.

The major findings and recommendations from these studies are outlined in Appendix A.

### Stewardship Objectives

Based on the findings and recommendations from the natural resource assessments, the Lancaster Conservation Commission has identified the following overarching objectives for Stewardship of the Town Forest.

1. Maintain and enhance native biological diversity and wildlife habitat values on the Town Forest
2. Protect Town Forest groundwater resources and aquifers to support high water quality and flood resilience.
3. Maintain and improve non-motorized recreation and learning opportunities for Lancaster residents.
4. Improve pedestrian access to Town Forest.

### Strategies

In order to meet the four objectives above, the LCC has identified the following specific strategies as a starting point:

1. Preserve the Town Forest natural resource base as “Highest Ranked” wildlife habitat in the NH Wildlife Action Plan. (Objective 1)

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2. Through the Town Master Plan, develop and implement a plan to address invasives identified in the Rapid Ecological Assessment. (Objective 1)
3. Re-route and improve NH Heritage Trail from Page Hill Road, through Town Forest to Old Kilkenny Railway to improve pedestrian access and minimize impacts in Ecologically Sensitive areas. (Objectives 1 & 3)
4. Re-route the Corridor 5 snowmobile trail away from beaver dam crossing to exit at the northeast corner to reduce maintenance needs and minimize impacts in Ecologically Sensitive areas. (Objectives 1, 2 & 3)
5. Place a conservation easement on the Town Forest to ensure permanent protection of its ecological values.
6. Stabilize and improve portions of the main logging skid roads (currently grown in and slash-covered) to enable pedestrian use. (Objective 3)
7. Work with partner organizations and town residents to identify priorities and develop specific programs for non-motorized recreation, environmental education and citizen science. (Objective 3)

### Role of Conservation Commission

The Lancaster Conservation Commission, working in close partnership with the Town Manager, will provide oversight of Stewardship Plan and the strategies outlined here. The Commission will review progress on Stewardship Plan objectives and strategies annually and revise the plan as needed.

### Partners

The following potential partners have been identified:

- Cohos Trail Association
- Colonel Town Recreation Department
- Lancaster Snow Drifters Snowmobile Club (Corridor 5 Snowmobile Trail)
- NH Fish and Game Department Non-Game Species Program
- NH Department of Environmental Services
- Northern Forest Center (Ecological Assessment, Recreational Trails programs)
- Taproot Environmental Education Center
- Upper CT Cooperative Invasives Species Management Area (UC-CISMA)

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**Appendix A: Major Findings of Resource-Based Assessments of Lancaster Town Forest**

Study	Major Findings	Recommendations
<p>Functional Assessment of Wetlands, Lancaster NH, Severance &amp; Lawson, 2006</p>	<p>This is by far the largest wetland complex in the town of Lancaster and has the highest functional value of all wetland complexes assessed.</p> <p>It received particularly high scores due to the existence of large amounts of undeveloped land within and around this complex, and for rare and endangered species habitat.</p> <p>The wetlands inventoried are unique in Lancaster just due to their extremely large sizes. Six of the seven wetlands are over 100 acres, with the largest nearing 2,000 acres. Where many towns in the southern part of NH would consider 15 acres to be a large tract of land, Lancaster’s smallest wetland assessed and ranked is more than three times this size.</p>	<p>Consider establishing Prime Wetlands in Town as a means to help protect these areas from developmental pressures.</p> <p>Lancaster has a rare opportunity to proactively protect large wetland areas from development.</p>
<p>Natural Resources Inventory, Lawson, November 2020</p>	<p>Burnside, Whipple, and Otter Brooks with associated wetlands (<i>including the Town Forest/Indian Brook Wetland</i>) include “Highest Ranked Habitat” in the Biological Region.</p>	<p>Based on the locations of the underlying aquifers in Lancaster, it is important to protect the quality of groundwater, brooks, streams, and aquifers in Town. Pursue ways to further conserve the functionality and vulnerability of these wetlands.</p> <p>Water quality should continue to be addressed not only in the largest three rivers (Connecticut, Israels, and Garland Brook), but also in the headwater streams and brooks that feed into these rivers.</p>
<p>Functional Assessment of Wetlands (Northumberland Tributaries Subwatershed &amp; Headwater Area of Otter Brook Subwatershed), Lawson, August 2022</p>	<p>The Indian Brook Wetland had highest functional scores in Ecological Integrity, Fish and Aquatic Habitat, Scenic Quality, Wetland-based Recreation, Sediment Trapping, Nutrient Transformation, and Shoreline Anchoring. These higher scores are due to the remote location with very little disturbance</p>	<p>The Lancaster Town Forest, although public land and owned by the Town of Lancaster, is not conserved at the time of this study. It is recommended that the Town pursue putting this property into a conservation easement.</p> <p>Continued work on the Lancaster Town Forest, should help increase access to this incredible wetland complex for educational potential and public enjoyment of the wetland area.</p>

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Study	Major Findings	Recommendations
	<p>around it, the diversity of wetland and habitat types, and the amount of open water habitat.</p> <p>The Town Forest contains the headwaters of Indian Brook, and a series of diverse wetland types enhanced by beaver activities as described above. It is also considered Tier 2 – Highest Ranked Habitat in Biological Region – by NH Fish and Game Department.</p> <p>Currently, these wetlands are in good shape. The ecological diversity is high and water quality is good, and there is relatively little impact from development.</p>	<p>Detrimental impact to these wetlands will affect wetlands and groundwater downstream. Now is the time to work towards ensuring these wetlands continue to function at a high quality.</p>
<p>Town of Lancaster Town Forest Trail Development Lidar Multispectral 5-Band Imagery Map, Whiteout Solutions, August 2022</p>	<p>Trail suitability analysis considering combined factors such as proximity to wetlands. Proximity to parking, low grade slope, non-south facing aspect and proximity to [existing] trails.</p>	<p>A number of existing and proposed trails were outlined.</p>
<p>Lancaster Town Forest Initial Site Visit, AMC Trails Department, October 2022</p>	<p>Many [logging skid] roads are in very good condition and not full of slash and logging debris.</p> <p>The terrain is rolling and relatively dry. Nominal glacial features and valley drainages amongst the rolling, wooded topography provides abundant natural features for exploration and enjoyment on this year-round property while being mindful of priority natural resource and wildlife values through Conservation Commission management.</p> <p>The installation of any recreational trails will require regular and annual maintenance to care for the trails.</p>	<p>It would be far more cost effective to modify existing skid roads for hikers/snowshoers/skiers as opposed to cutting new trails on the property. Modest modifications to the existing skid roads would provide acceptable passage for hikers as well as snowshoers and skiers during the winter months. Improvements to existing skid roads would not be recommended for mountain bikes.</p> <p>A sustainable trail alignment could be identified, and a basic trail can be installed for hikers/snowshoers/skiers. Overall, there is little need to construct new trails, but in this case a segment of new trail would connect existing skid roads along the west and east ends of the Town Forest.</p> <p>Should [a northern boundary] perimeter loop be considered for a recreational loop hike the northern portion would require new trail construction.</p>

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<b>Study</b>	<b>Major Findings</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
<p>Rapid Ecological Assessment of Lancaster Town Forest, Peters, November 2022</p>	<p>The Town Forest is part of a large, unfragmented forest block contributing to excellent largescale connectivity across the Connecticut River valley from the Northeastern Highlands of Vermont to the heights of the Kilkenny Range.</p> <p>During this study, twelve rare or presumed-rare plant species were discovered; five invasive species were also newly documented during this study.</p>	<p>Develop a forest stewardship plan that balances ecological protection with multiple-use objectives for forest management and recreation, incorporating the Significant Ecological Areas (SEAs) and the underlying ecological resources identified in the REA.</p> <p>Develop and implement an invasive species management plan focused on monitoring and controlling the documented invasives to limit their impact and spread and help prevent further introductions.</p> <p>Pursue legal conservation of the Lancaster Town Forest through a conservation easement that incorporates the findings of this study.</p> <p>Consider municipal designation of the Indian Brook Wetland complex as a Prime Wetland under RSA 482-A. 6)</p> <p>Follow Best Management Practices (BMPs), or more protective standards, for all forest management and recreational development activities on the town forest, referencing Good Forestry in the Granite State and New Hampshire Best Management Practices for Erosion Control on Timber Harvesting Operations.</p> <p>Consider setting aside some additional upland forest ‘reserve’ areas to develop older forest conditions, these might be managed with longer harvest rotations or excluded from harvest altogether.</p> <p>Consider enhancements to the access network to facilitate local engagement with the Town Forest for recreational and educational uses. Possible enhancements might include rejuvenating and maintaining the Heritage Trail and its approaches to the Town Forest (with any necessary and appropriate upgrades to water handling and erosion controls, particularly at the mapped seepage crossing) or improving road access up to the main landing in the panhandle in order to expand access to the Indian Brook Wetland.</p>

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**Appendix B – List of Natural Resource Assessments**

Town of Lancaster Natural Resources Inventory, Lawson, November 2020  
[2020 Lancaster Natural Resource Inventory](#)

Town of Lancaster Functional Wetlands Assessment, Lawson & Severance, 2006  
[Town of Lancaster Functional Assessment of Wetlands-November, 2006](#)

A Rapid Ecological Assessment of the Lancaster Town Forest, Lancaster, NH, Peters, 2002  
[Lancaster Town Forest Rapid Ecological Assessment-November 15, 2022](#)

**Appendix C – Proposed Trail Rerouting**

See attached Map “Lancaster Town Forest Stewardship Plan February 2023 - Appendix C”