

FALL 2024

# THE BNRC Report



BERKSHIRE NATURAL RESOURCES COUNCIL

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# THE BNRC Report

FALL 2024

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## Letter from the President DISCOVERING NATURE AT YOUR OWN SPEED

Hikers lace up their boots, hoist their backpacks, and scramble up rocky ridges that take hours to summit, right?

Not always. And not every trail requires a "hike."

I didn't grow up in an outdoorsy family. Our family walks were limited to circling our urban blocks after Thanksgiving dinner. But last year, my dad and stepmother came to visit from Michigan for my daughter's college graduation. I wanted to show them what I do, and what better way to do that than take them out on a trail?

However, my dad, age 86 at the time, couldn't walk very far, and he definitely couldn't "hike." **But because of BNRC's focus on building accessible trails, I knew just where to go:** Parsons Marsh was the perfect spot, accessible for mobility devices and slow and fragile walkers like my dad. We made our way slowly down the path to the boardwalk, and he sat down to rest at every bench.

As someone who never spent much time in the woods, he was surprised to see trees lying on the forest floor along the way, very different from the more familiar manicured city parks and gardens. I was able to explain how allowing fallen trees to decay naturally provides habitat for all kinds of plants, animals, and birds. "I get it," he told me.

We finally reached the viewing platform, where the two of them sat for a while and just breathed in the view. While they appreciated the sounds of red-winged blackbirds on the pond, I was appreciating that, without an accessible trail, they would never have been able to see this beautiful spot.

It's really satisfying to know my parents "get it"—they understand what I do and why. Even more satisfying is knowing BNRC is finding new ways to help everyone discover nature, at their own speed.

Warmly,

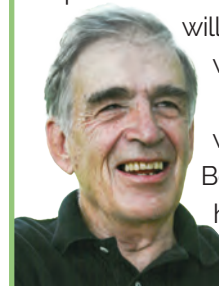
Jenny Hansell, President  
[jhansell@bnrc.org](mailto:jhansell@bnrc.org)



Jenny's parents, Sandy and Raina Hansell, enjoying the accessible trail at Parsons Marsh.

### George Wislocki (1935 - 2024)

A full tribute to BNRC's founder, celebrating his life and his importance to the Berkshires,



will be shared in the weeks to come.

The Berkshires wouldn't be the Berkshires without his great gifts and tireless work.



Photo: John Kidd

America Lopez, top right, leading a BNRC Spanish speaking hike at The Boulders in Dalton.

## ALLIES AND ACHIEVERS: PARTNERS INCREASING COMMUNITY IMPACT

Welcoming people to nature—  
in community.

"Listening to different voices and creating programs to meet community needs is both fulfilling BNRC's mission and expanding it," says Charlotte Hood, BNRC's Volunteer and Outreach Manager. "Not everyone fits the typical profile of a 'hiker'. These programs support folks who may be new to walking on trails or feel safer being outdoors with a group of people who identify similarly."

**Seeing Rainbows**, a trans-led art organization serving Berkshire county, recently launched a partnership with BNRC. Together, we've hosted a Beginner Birding hike at Basin Pond and an arts event at Housatonic Flats, which brought together community (of all kinds!) to create a space where people feel comfortable expressing themselves through art. Sitting on a blanket by the river in the late summer evening, we met new friends and explored collage, t-shirt printing, origami, and music.

"We've been so fortunate to find such enthusiastic partners in BNRC. It's refreshing to have such strong allies in our work connecting the trans community to outdoor recreation in our region," said Nuri Héd, Seeing Rainbows' Director.

América López, Coordinator of Outdoors and Community at **Latinas413**, leads Spanish-language hikes and workdays for BNRC. América also helps guide the publication of BNRC's Spanish-language maps, brochures, signage, and website to ensure we are providing the information most helpful to the Spanish-speaking community.

Meg Bandarra started **Unpaved Trails for All** to promote accessible trails that help people with mobility considerations connect more closely with nature. Meg was recently appointed to serve on BNRC's DEIAB Committee and was an important voice in recent accessibility improvements at the Old Mill Trail (see page 6 for more on how Meg inspired and supported that project).

Visit [bnrc.org/events](https://bnrc.org/events) to see upcoming free public programs and guided hikes. 🌍



For the fourth year, students from YES! (Youth Enrichment Services, Boston) have visited the Berkshires for a summer hike. "The Clam River hike and river exploration were standout experiences for our campers," said YES! Staffer, Dane Kimbrough.



Photo: Gabrielle K. Murphy

## BERKSHIRE AUTUMN WONDERS

The wonders of autumn abound here in Berkshire County. If you're wondering where to find the best fall hikes, strolls, vistas, and foliage, here are a few BNRC Reserves that staff and board members find extra special in this colorful season of transition.

### Hoosac Range | North Adams



*Recommended by Rachel Hailey, BNRC DEIAB Committee member and Doug Brown, Director of Stewardship*

With stunning views across northern Berkshire County and into Vermont, this is a reserve that shouldn't be missed at peak fall foliage. Multiple trails pass several dramatic vistas from Spruce Hill, Sunset Rock, and the Wigwam Summit viewpoint on Route 2. This reserve can get busy in the autumn season, but as Rachel points out, it's worth the visit: "It has such a beautiful view of my town and area!"

### Mahanna Cobble | Pittsfield/Lenox



*Recommended by Carrie Holland, BNRC Board Member*

"I love how accessible it is through the Bousquet property," Carrie says. "You can get up to a nice foliage view relatively quickly, and the second-hand excitement for ski season is a bonus, too!" Plus, this reserve is the flagship trail in BNRC's High Road. Extend your outing up to 8 miles along Yokun Ridge and into downtown Lenox, with some expansive views of hills, valleys, forests, and farms along the way!



Find driving directions and accessible trail information for these and other BNRC trails at [bnrc.org/reserves](https://bnrc.org/reserves)

## Old Mill Trail | Hinsdale/Dalton



*Recommended by Jenny Hansell, President*

There's something magical about The Old Mill Trail. "The atmosphere is suffused with its long history, going back 10,000 years to when indigenous people fished and hunted here, to the fascinating papermill era, to its new life as accessible conservation land," Jenny says. "Walking here is like entering another world—the tunnel of trees, the boulders by the river where you can sit and let the sound of the rushing water clear your mind and soothe your soul." The three-mile, out-and-back trail offers accessible parking and great views of the East Branch of the Housatonic River.

## Hollow Fields | Richmond



*Recommended by Stephen Alsdorf, BNRC Board Member*

The 660+ acres of linked hayfields and forests offer the Berkshires' best view of Yokun Ridge. "Open fields with big views and a hike along the Taconic Ridge are just the best in the crisp fall air," Steve says. His advice? Late afternoon is the best time to visit, but in the fall any time of the day can be delightful. Please do not park directly on Perry's Peak Road, and please respect our neighbors.

## Alford Springs | Alford



*Recommended by Deanna Smith, High Road Manager*

Deanna loves this mostly forested ridgeline for its unique views of Mt. Greylock from the top of Father Loop trail. It's a quiet, big-woods reserve with multiple trail options that vary from moderate to difficult. "Running the Father Loop is one of my favorite things to do on a weekend morning, particularly in the fall when the weather is cooler. Followed by the scenic drive into Great Barrington for a coffee and pastry—it's a great way to start a Saturday!"

## Steepletop | New Marlborough/Sandisfield



*Recommended by Doug Brown, Director of Stewardship*

With its five miles of marked and maintained trails plus three miles of wood roads, all on easy grades, Steepletop is an ideal stop for autumn exploration. With multiple wetlands along the trails, you can catch fall foliage early—Doug explains that red maples near the wetlands are more stressed and change color earlier in the fall. "I love it because as the season progresses, the variety of forest types gives you leaf peeping opportunities through October."

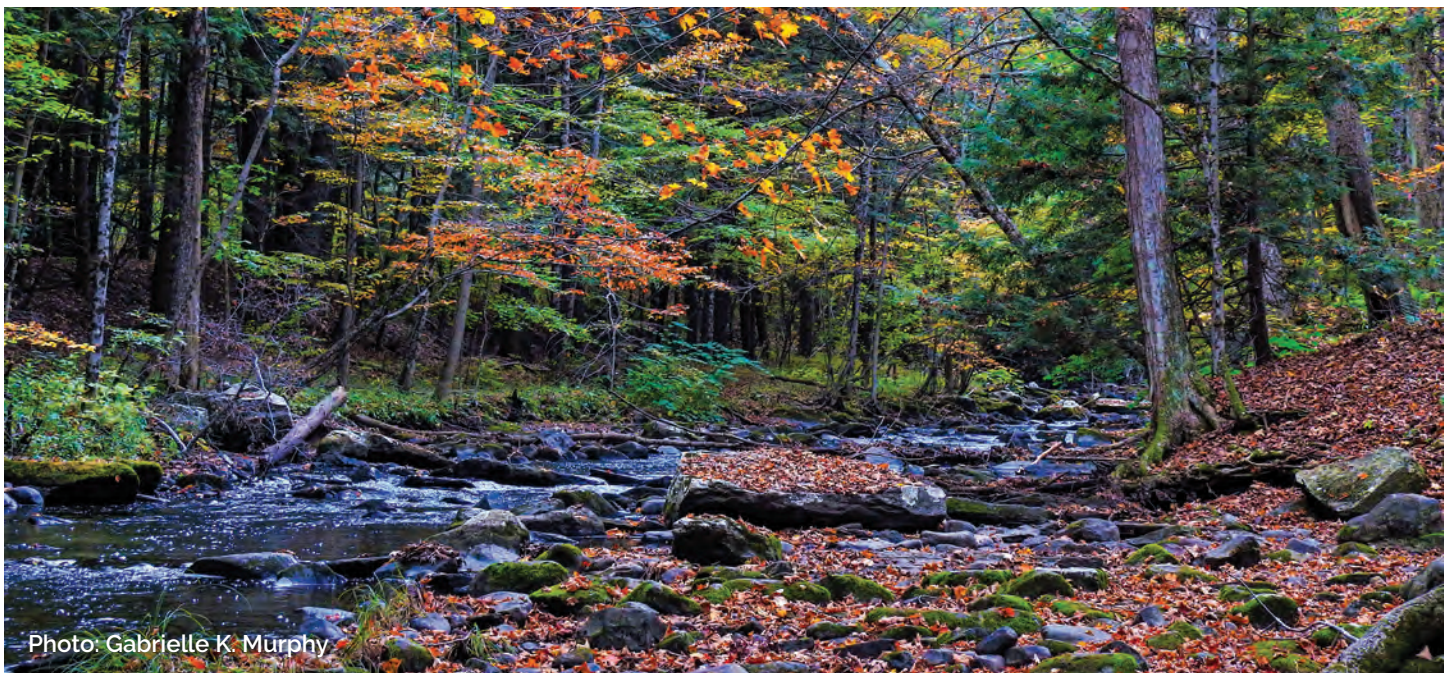


Photo: Gabrielle K. Murphy

# RESPONDING TO OUR COMMUNITY

## Accessibility improvements at the Old Mill Trail Reserve



When Meg Bandarra set out to visit the Old Mill Trail a few years ago, she was looking forward to experiencing what she'd read was a beautiful accessible trail along the banks of the Housatonic River. But when she arrived, she realized that her mobility device could not navigate the parking lot. She found both the parking lot and portions of the trail were not accessible—there was no way she could experience its beauty.

"I had to leave. There was nothing I could access," said Bandarra, the founder of Unpaved Trails for All, an advocacy group. "I assumed that nobody at BNRC would care about my experience or do anything about it." But she decided to email us a few days after the failed visit anyway.

"I was surprised and impressed by the fast, thoughtful response I received," said Meg.

The parking lot, as Meg had discovered, was not accessible. Fortunately, the renovation work was already scheduled. Because BNRC has nearly 60 reserves spread across Berkshire County, infrastructure projects get planned several years out; big ones like a parking lot renovation also depend on finding the funding.

In 2020, a bequest arrived, earmarked specifically for parking lots. The team had hoped to use the \$100,000 gift to build lots at four of the most heavily used reserves, but the technical requirements of

this project were such that almost the entire amount was used for the Old Mill Trail. (For more information about supporting BNRC's work, see page 11)

"The Old Mill Trail is a special spot," said BNRC President Jenny Hansell. "Now everyone can experience that mystery and magic."

The 127-acre Old Mill Trail reserve provides nature access along the East Branch of the Housatonic River. The first 1.4-mile segment of the trail is accessible, with a compacted, crushed stone path following the river. MassTrails grant funded trail improvements in 2021 and 2023, including resurfacing, an expanded platform at the end of the crushed stone section, and improvements to the bridge decking, making the trail both accessible and sustainable over the long term.

By the time the New York Times featured the trail in a June 2024 article about the pleasures of the Housatonic River, parking lot renovation work was underway, and the reserve was closed.

The article, written by longtime BNRC donor Mark Vanhoenacker, celebrated its beauty and history:

*This 1.5-mile riverside path leads through hemlock and hobblebush to overgrown reminders—the foundations of old mills, and the trenches that formerly channeled hydropower—of the industry that once capitalized on the Housatonic's precipitous descent from Hinsdale to Dalton, where paper for U.S. currency has been produced since 1879.*

*—New York Times, June 26, 2024*

"I'm thrilled BNRC was able to upgrade accessibility at this site and look forward to visiting the trail and experiencing the improvements. As an organization, BNRC has been working to make outdoor recreation more inclusive of people of all abilities, and I've been happy to partner with them," said Bandarra. Earlier this year, she joined BNRC's DEIAB Committee, a group that meets regularly to advise program staff and provide a range of perspectives on diversity, equity, inclusion, access, and belonging. 🌱

## from the community . . .

"I'm a former hiker, now in a wheelchair. Glad to see some accessible trails!"

—GAIL BLACKHALL, PITTSFIELD, MA

"I'm thrilled BNRC was able to upgrade accessibility at Old Mill Trail. As an organization BNRC has been working to make outdoor recreation more inclusive of people of all abilities, and I've been happy to partner with them."

—MEG BANDARRA, UNPAVED TRAILS FOR ALL



## BERKSHIRE COUNTY TRAILS FOR ALL

There are many accessible trails in Berkshire County in addition to the Old Mill Trail, built and maintained by different organizations. Learn more at [bnrc.org](https://bnrc.org).

We'd also be glad to mail you a copy of our Berkshire County Trails for All brochure, and you are welcome to stop by our offices in Lenox any time to grab one!

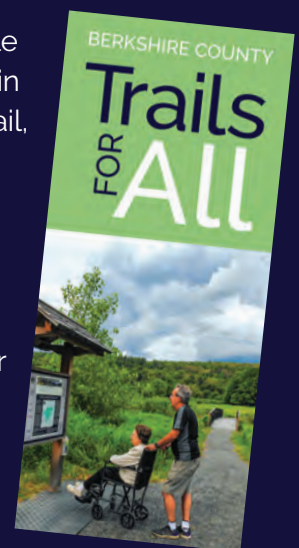




Photo: Gabrielle K. Murphy

## BUSHWHACKING TO THE HIGH ROAD

Planning new trails opens doors to the natural world.

by Deanna Smith, High Road Manager

Three hours into our trek across the Hoosac Range, and my hiking partner and I decide to break for lunch. We're somewhere amongst the 15,000+ acres of woodlands that constitute the Hoosac Range scouting a potential route which will someday be part of BNRC's High Road trail network.

What began as a hike on a trail has slowly turned into more of a wayfinding exercise. The occasional weathered blue blaze is all that indicates we're still on the intended route. We scramble up an embankment, cresting the ridge to a small clearing. From this location, the majesty of Mt. Greylock, Massachusetts's highest peak, is in full view. It's a unique vantage point, and I wonder to myself how many others have had the privilege of seeing the mountain from this perspective.

On this uncharacteristically comfortable day in late June, our mission was to explore the area where BNRC's Hoosac Range Reserve joins with the Department of Conservation and Recreation's Savoy State Forest. This particular ridgeline—one of several in the county that have been protected by joint efforts between conservation entities—forms a geological barrier between the Berkshires and the Pioneer Valley.

The appeal of building a High Road route here is multifaceted. Once complete, it will provide hikers with all the things that make for an inviting hike: immersion in nature, physical challenge, numerous sweeping vistas. Hikers will be able to traverse the rocky slope in its entirety, beginning at the ridge's northern end in the City of North Adams, and finishing at its southern end in the Town of Adams.

In this context, The High Road seeks to create a connection in the most literal sense. But there's a deeper, perhaps more important, connection that underlies the vision of The High Road. That is the connection between individual and place.

### Trails, Connection, and Access

I've often thought about trails as keys which open a door to a more accessible natural world. Were it not for trails, all but the most intrepid among us would miss the opportunity to experience remote wild



places. This is a core tenet of what BNRC seeks to achieve with The High Road; to connect people with our region's diverse natural environment. Thinking about The High Road through this lens of access has been a guiding principle in its planning.

### Creating Links

Currently, the Berkshires has four long distance trails: The Appalachian Trail, whose 91 miles in Berkshire County encompass just a small fragment of its larger 2,200-mile route between Maine and Georgia; the Taconic Crest Trail which offers hikers scenic views of rolling hills, lush forests, and picturesque valleys as it straddles the border between New York and Massachusetts; The Mahican-Mohawk Trail, which follows a historical route of the indigenous Mohican people who once lived here; and the Ashuwillticook Rail Trail, a paved route along 13 miles of repurposed rail bed.

The High Road seeks not only to create new trail connections, but to expand access to these existing networks, enabling new experiences and opportunities for exploring Berkshire County's abundant hills, forests, and farmlands.

One example of this is what we're calling the Cross-County Connector, a High Road segment currently under development, which will provide a connection between the Taconic Crest Trail and the Ashuwillticook. In December 2023, BNRC protected 176 acres in Lanesborough. This parcel, in addition to its high conservation value, was the final missing piece of the proposed route's corridor.

As The High Road develops, BNRC will continue to seek opportunities like this one, which will not only protect lands of high ecological importance, but expand access to those who seek to explore them.

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Back at the clearing, a cool, light breeze replenished us for the final leg of our journey. I pull a dog-eared paper map from my pocket and my partner and I mull over our options to descend the ridge.

As we set off down the trail, the rhythmic crunch of our boots on the sunbaked earth mingles with the soft rustling of hay-scented ferns. With each step, I'm reminded of the importance of this work: Ensuring that future generations can share in this same sense of wonder and connection to nature that we've found on this day. 🌿

## Subscribe to the outdoors!

How often do you spend time outside: participating in a hobby, admiring the landscape or wildlife, shopping at your local farmer's market, thinking about the importance of the natural world? At least once a month? If time outside means something to you, please **subscribe to the Berkshire outdoors with a monthly gift to BNRC**. Giving starts at \$5 per month (*less than a subscription for most, if not all, of your streaming services*). Make a difference all year long. Visit [bnrc.org/donate](https://bnrc.org/donate) and click the "monthly" giving option to get started.



[bnrc.org/donate](https://bnrc.org/donate)

### from the community . . .

"My children, grandchildren and I very much appreciate your maintaining hiking trails and providing explanatory brochures."

—MICHAEL BERENSON, WASHINGTON, D.C.

"There are lots of hiking programs in the Berkshires—the fact that BNRC's hikes are free and also of great quality is unbeatable!"

—ANONYMOUS

"I know the power of outdoor education to inspire a relationship with the natural world. I grew up in a city—opportunities like this at an early age helped launch me toward a conservation career."

—CHARLOTTE HOOD, BNRC VOLUNTEER AND OUTREACH MANAGER

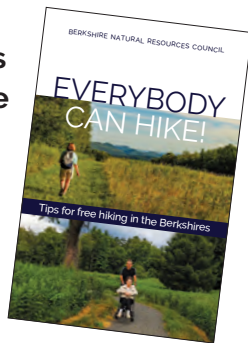
# Did you know?

You can check out **nature discovery backpacks** with your library card from Berkshire Athenaeum in Pittsfield or from the North Adams Public Library. Each pack comes with field guides, BNRC trail maps, a basic first-aid kit, a compass, binoculars, a magnifying glass, bug spray, two ponchos, and an observational journal.

## New to hiking? Check out BNRC's free Everybody Can Hike brochure

to find information about what to bring and how to prepare to stay comfortable, safe, and confident when you're out on the trail.

This resource is available for free on the BNRC website, can be picked up from the BNRC office, or can be mailed right to your door. Email [hello@bnrc.org](mailto:hello@bnrc.org) for more information.



There are so many ways to explore the wonders of nature. **BNRC offers free, year-round programs and guided hikes.** We help people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities get outside and learn about nature and wildlife—and there are options in both English and Spanish. Visit [bnrc.org/events](https://bnrc.org/events) to see what's coming up or join BNRC's e-mail list to get updates directly to your inbox.

BNRC land conservation often happens in partnership with other organizations and with individual landowners. **Interested in protecting your land, or learning more about best practices in caring for your land or forest?** Send an email to [hello@bnrc.org](mailto:hello@bnrc.org) and a member of the conservation team will be in touch.


The care and stewardship of over 60 miles of trail takes A LOT of work and could not be accomplished without the incredible support of BNRC volunteers. The volunteer program features a variety of opportunities both outdoors and inside at BNRC offices. **Interested in volunteering?** Learn more at [bnrc.org/volunteer](https://bnrc.org/volunteer). 



Photo: Gabrielle K. Murphy

## from the community . . .

"The other day while walking Housatonic Flats, I was so grateful that it was there. I've walked other BNRC trails as well. So I thought it would be neat to help with those efforts [as a volunteer] and meet some of the people that have made these trails possible."

—MARCIA STAMELL

"I love hiking with my dog and have found that some of the best trails in the Berkshires have been the BNRC trails. I love to help support the mission [by volunteering], give back to my community and create wonderful natural spaces for people to enjoy!"

—ALLISON COATES

"Thank you for the informative and fun wildflower walk. The Old Mill trail was new to me, and it was very pretty. My friend had such a good time she even bought a backpack! We want to sign up for all your upcoming programs."

—ANONYMOUS

# You make it all happen

BNRC is donor funded. Your support makes a lasting difference. For the conservation of land, for the lives and ecosystems of local and migratory wildlife, for the protection of farmland and support of local farmers, and for free public programming and access to the Berkshire outdoors for everybody.

**QUESTIONS?** Contact Melanie Winters at [mwinters@bnrc.org](mailto:mwinters@bnrc.org), or 413-499-0596.



[bnrc.org/donate](https://bnrc.org/donate)

There are many ways to give! Scan to support BNRC and the Berkshire outdoors.



@bnrc\_org



# Berkshire Natural Resources Council

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## Old Mill Trail parking area is **now accessible.**

BNRC completed work this summer to upgrade the parking area at the Old Mill Trail Reserve to meet Forest Service Trail Accessibility standards. Portions of the trail are also accessible for wheelchairs, strollers, and other mobility devices.

Find out more about the accessible upgrades on page 6.