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## Keeping Critical Connections for Wildlife

Good things take time. More than 20 years ago, the Forest Society acquired an option to purchase the Gilman Forest from the Freeto family in Tamworth. Finally, with the help of an active group of Tamworth residents, the Gilman Forest has been conserved.

The Forest Society owns and will manage the Gilman Forest as one of its reservations, and the Tamworth Conservation Commission now holds a conservation easement on the property.

"The Gilman Forest adds to 900 acres of conserved land in Tamworth and Sandwich, including the Forest Society's Porter-Rogerson Forest," said Forest Society President/Forester Jane Difley. "We're grateful to the Freeto family for their commitment to community land conservation."

### The Freeto Family Legacy

For the Freeto sisters—Sandy Peterson, Diana Louis, Faith Hadden, and Deb Ballam—this completes a conservation project begun 23 years ago by their late father, when the family donated a conservation easement on a small portion of the land. Recently, the sisters generously sold this 138-acre property for far less than its appraised value.

"This is such a nice legacy for our parents," said Sandy Peterson. "Our mother has always been a strong believer in conservation, and the land meant a lot to our dad. His roots were here."

The sisters' father came to Tamworth as a teenager. He cut wood for a farmer for several years and was paid with a gift of three acres. He built his home on it, adding additional acreage over time. It was here that he chose to raise his four daughters.

"We grew up in this paradise," said Peterson. "We rode our horses and hiked all over."

She and her sisters have always enjoyed the property, and they are pleased to know that their family's efforts, combined with those of the Town of Tamworth and the Forest Society, have ensured that the land will remain in a natural state.

"To be part of creating something like this—it's really wonderful," she said. "I hope our efforts will inspire other landowners in the area to follow suit."

### Feet on the Ground in Tamworth

The protection of the Gilman Forest is one of a long string of conservation successes that the Forest Society has helped craft in Tamworth in partnership with the Tamworth Conservation Commission over

the past 30 years. The Conservation Commission was a crucial partner in the Gilman Forest project. With the Forest Society providing technical support, a team of local volunteers raised almost all the funding needed to conserve this land in a highly successful campaign during the height of the recession.

"We couldn't have completed this project without the great help of our local partner," said Tom Howe, Senior Director of Land Conservation at the Forest Society. "Ned Beecher, as Chair of the Conservation Commission, served capably as the key liaison and coordinator for the town, and John Mersfelder coordinated the highly successful local fundraising campaign."

"It was a fine cooperative effort, bringing together the expertise of the Forest Society and our local knowledge, connections, and enthusiasm," said Beecher. "It's an exciting model for conservation."

John Mersfelder, former Tamworth Conservation Commission chair for decades and active Forest Society member, led the fundraising for the Gilman Forest, gathering a core group with diverse talents, including a photographer and professional consultant.

The fundraising committee had doubts



*The Gilman Forest includes 2,500 feet of frontage on Mill Brook, a pretty and unspoiled tributary of the Bearcamp River. Photo by Nelson O'Bryan.*

at the start of the project, given the economic climate. Also, the Gilman Forest was fairly remote, and not many people were familiar with it. The group decided to reach out first to the people who lived closest to the property.

“Once the neighbors understood what was going on, they made significant contributions,” said Mersfelder.

Word soon spread through the community, helped by front page news coverage. When all was said and done, more than 100 individuals had contributed to the conservation effort.

“We are especially grateful to the Tamworth Foundation, which filled the remaining gap in our fundraising,” Mersfelder said.

The conservation easement guarantees hikers, hunters, skiers, and others continued foot access to the property’s trails, which connect to a larger regional trail network maintained by the Mill Brook Trail Association. The Tamworth Conservation Commission has assumed responsibility for making and maintaining additional public access improvements, such as a possible parking area, kiosk, and signage, and to oversee public recreational usage.

### **Teeming with Wildlife**

The Bearcamp Trackers, a group of trained volunteers who have been collecting data on wildlife activity in the Tamworth area for the past seven years, surveyed the Gilman Forest property. Wildlife tracks, scat, and tree scrapes provided evidence of moose, bear, raccoon, otter, coyote, turkey, grouse, deer, bobcat, and smaller mammals. Several vernal pools on site contain frog and salamander eggs in abundance. The land also includes about 2,500 feet of frontage on Mill Brook, a pretty and unspoiled tributary of the Bearcamp River.

The Gilman Forest is part of a broader landscape that includes a rich tapestry of fields, forests, rivers, and marshes that provide essential habitat for many wide-ranging species. The Forest Society, New Hampshire Audubon, and the New Hampshire Department of Fish and Game’s Wildlife Action Plan have noted the importance of the Tamworth-Sandwich region since the 1990s.

### **WOW**

Currently, the landscape that connects the White and Ossipee mountains includes working and recreational forests as well as

lands that remain relatively untouched by humans. For several years, ecologists and land conservationists have been developing a concept of connectivity between lands which, if isolated by development, would undermine the health of breeding animal populations. Human activities like road use and development threaten to permanently separate animal populations.

The effort to conserve the Gilman Forest has inspired more than a dozen local and state conservation groups to support the concept of land connectivity within this strategic corridor. WOW—the Whites-to-Ossipees Wildlife connectivity initiative—emphasizes the important qualities of individual lands within the context of the extended landscape and seeks to conserve the lands that provide the greatest natural resource benefits.

“The Gilman Forest is the first conservation property specifically involved in the Tamworth Conservation Commission’s new focus on land conservation that provides wildlife habitat protection for connectivity between the Sandwich Range and the Ossipee Mountains,” said Beecher. “Being successful here gives hope for this long-term initiative.” ♪