

VERMONT FISH & WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT

Wildlife Management Area Report



2008 Annual Report

Hunting Access - Opportunity Knocks

By Chris Saunders

Opportunity knocks, but it isn't always obvious, especially when it's a Wildlife Management Area (WMA). The Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department's (FWD) 84 WMAs and riparian lands are vital assets for wildlife conservation, and provide over 202 square miles of land for Vermonters to enjoy quality fish and wildlife based outdoor opportunities, such as birdwatching, hunting, fishing, or trapping. Far less obvious, however, is just how important simply having these opportunities is to the future of one of those activities: hunting. Indeed, research suggests that providing hunting access is the single most important step that fish and wildlife agencies can take to keep hunters engaged, and to introduce new participants to the activity.

"Access is the number one issue that agencies can do something about to improve hunter recruitment and retention," said Mark Duda, Executive Director of Responsive Management, a leading natural resources survey group. "Our studies have found that the amount of federal land and the percentage of lands that are state-leased or owned lands are the most important indicators for strong hunter numbers. On the other hand, the most negative indicator is the amount of urbanization occurring in a state."



It's no secret that hunting participation – both in terms of hunter numbers and days afield – is declining. In Vermont, this decline has stabilized recently, and there's even been some rebound, but the long term trends are still discouraging. The reasons behind this decline are also no secret; an increasingly urbanized world means fewer people are being exposed to hunting, let alone giving it a try. Vermonters that do hunt are getting older, and they have less time to hunt because of family and work obligations. Also, when they find time to hunt, they're having a difficult time finding places to go because there are simply fewer places to hunt. It's not a major reason why hunters quit, at least not yet, but after work and family, it's the top reason preventing them from hunting



Access to quality hunting areas, such as Vermont's Wildlife Management Areas, is essential for the recruitment and retention of hunters.

more and it's the leading cause of hunter dissatisfaction. Not crowding. Not anti-hunters. Not even lack of game.

"Every study we do suggests private access is getting worse," said Duda. "Land is being eaten up by development, and the remaining landowners are locking people out or leasing their land to private clubs."

Leasing has yet to catch on in Vermont, except for some prime waterfowl spots in the Champlain Valley. But for many American hunters, especially, in the Southeast, 'renting' land to hunt for the season is the norm. Imagine, for example, wanting to try golf, but being required to get a country club membership before your first swing. If you're lucky, you might know someone with connections, but if you don't, you'll have to stick to the driving range. This is really no different than hunting. Public lands, like WMAs, provide free, quality training areas for new hunters, not just hunting grounds for old salts. They don't have to worry about asking permission. The boundaries are well-marked. The rules are spelled out and there are no gentlemanly agreements or arbitrary rules that favor certain animals or hunting spots for certain hunters.

In addition, the department's WMAs are well distributed throughout the state, and when combined with other State Forest land, Green Mountain National Forest, and Vermont's two U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service National Wildlife Refuges,

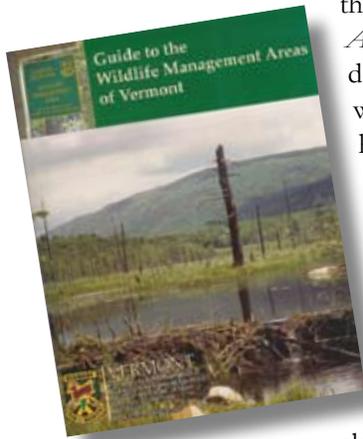
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Hunting Access *continued from page 1*

they virtually ensure every Vermonter is within easy reach of hunting, no matter what their income or abilities. Oddly though, many of the lands are lightly used. This is mostly a perception problem. In general, hunters prefer private land over public, and view the latter as being crowded and having less game. However, aside from opening morning of waterfowl season on a few of our more popular WMAs in the Champlain Valley, you will more than likely have the area to yourself.

“We have found there’s both physical and psychological access,” said Duda. “Physical access is obvious. But psychological access is just as important. Hunters assume there are not enough places to hunt and assume there are fewer places to hunt than in the past. This appears to be driven in part by a lack of information about hunter access locations.”

In short, the access has to be easily accessible. To combat this, all the department’s WMAs are featured on its website and in the *Guide to the Wildlife Management Areas of Vermont* book. Both feature detailed colored maps of each site with UTM coordinates, plus key habitat features and common fish and wildlife, including game species and hunting opportunities.



So while the department can’t add more hours in the week nor provide day care or maid service, it can ensure that once hunters find the time to go, they can also find plenty of opportunity in

the woods or marsh on a great WMA nearby. Local land access might allow them to hunt more, or perhaps even introduce a new person to the ranks of this classic element of Vermont’s rural character.

WMAs at a Glance

The department owns 84 WMAs and numerous riparian parcels totaling over 129,525 acres. These lands play an important role in meeting the department’s mission. Management of these areas emphasizes the conservation of fish and wildlife and their habitats, and the properties provide important public access for hunting, fishing, trapping and other fish and wildlife-based activities as well.

The department has purchased WMAs using several funding sources, including funds from hunting license sales, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration (Pittman-Robertson) Fund, Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, and the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Management and administration of all WMAs are primarily paid for through USFWS Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Funds.



Photo: Cedric Alexander

Spruce grouse were re-introduced to Victory Basin WMA with the goal of establishing a second population of this state-endangered species.

Assistance from the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation (FPR) staff is essential for completing WMA long range management planning, property administration, land acquisition, and habitat management projects. Wildlife habitat enhancement activities are conducted through commercial and noncommercial means to provide the rich diversity of habitat types and forest ages necessary to meet the needs of many wildlife species.

As with other Vermont Agency of Natural Resources (ANR) lands, the management of WMAs is guided by Long Range Management Plans (LRMP). LRMPs are based on a thorough natural resources inventory and public input gathered through various methods and stages. Management activities primarily focus on providing a diversity of fish and wildlife habitat as well as quality opportunities for fish and wildlife-based outdoor activities.

2008 Management Highlights

- Dead Creek WMA hosted the 7th annual Dead Creek Day, attended by over 600 wildlife enthusiasts.
- South Bay WMA was the focus of a cleanup effort in which over 50 volunteers removed nearly 60 cubic yards of trash from the WMA, tributary rivers and the bay.
- A comprehensive statewide inventory of WMA infrastructure was conducted, calculating miles of roads, parking areas, gates, signs, information kiosks, buildings, bridges, and dams, among other infrastructure.
- Vermont FWD was honored by Ducks Unlimited with the 2008 Bronze State Grant Award for conserving over 4,000 acres of wetlands in Quebec via contribution of \$100,000 in state Waterfowl Stamp funds since 1992. Quebec breeding habitat is essential for waterfowl that Vermonters enjoy.

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Property Administration

An essential component of any land management program is the maintenance of the property's boundaries and infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, and signs. Without these efforts, the habitat management and public use goals of each area may not be achievable. The 84 WMAs routinely require boundary line surveying and maintenance, building maintenance, signage, trash removal, and responses to encroachments and other trespasses.

The following maintenance activities were completed on WMAs during the 2008 calendar year:

- Installed or repaired **8** culverts or bridges
- Maintained **4** buildings
- Mowed/maintained **32** dams, dikes and levees
- Maintained **69.4** miles of forest roads
- Maintained **2,620** feet of fence
- Improved/maintained **39** parking areas, and constructed **6** new ones
- Maintained **53** WMA signs/kiosks
- Maintained **13.6** miles of property boundary line
- Maintained **8** gates and installed **1** new one
- Finalized **3** Long Range Management Plans; Plymbsbury WMA, Roaring Brook WMA, Tiny Pond WMA
- Conducted **14** cultural resource reviews
- Acquired **676** acres
- Addressed **78** policy issues (encroachments etc.)
- Conducted **16** presentations or press releases



Photo: Paul Hamelin

Evidence of nineteenth century mills, farms, railroads, logging camps, and factories is abundant on WMAs, along with a few Native American sites as well. All activities are reviewed to prevent potential impacts to these cultural resources.

Non-commercial Wildlife Habitat Management

Non-commercial fish and wildlife habitat management activities include projects where the habitat is enhanced through methods other than standard timber harvest contracts. In most cases, department wildlife biologists, other Agency of Natural Resources staff, volunteers, or private contractors perform these management activities.

The following non-commercial wildlife management activities were conducted during the 2008 calendar year:

- Installed/maintained **6** beaver wetland devices
- Mowed or maintained **908** acres of grassland and cropland
- Cleared competing brush from **71** apple trees, planted two acres of oak seedlings plus 75 additional mast trees
- Burned 26 acres and brush-hogged 142 acres to maintain **168** acres of old field habitat
- Restored stream bank by planting **1,145** trees
- Managed water levels on **965** acres of wetland habitat for waterfowl
- Maintained **737** waterfowl nest structures
- Installed **1** osprey nest structure
- Treated **33.3** acres to control invasive exotic plants
- Thinned saplings on **1.5** acres of future deer winter habitat
- Conducted **29** habitat/wildlife inventories



Photo: Wayne Laroché

Waterfowl nest boxes supplement natural tree cavities in hardwood swamps. FWD staff maintain them annually to ensure they remain a habitat enhancement rather than an attractive hazard for the birds.

Land Acquisition

Through a formal Land Acquisition Review Process, each year the department reviews and evaluates potential additions to department land holdings. The department has specific legislative funds that are designated solely for land acquisition, and judiciously reviews potential parcels, often turning down offers.

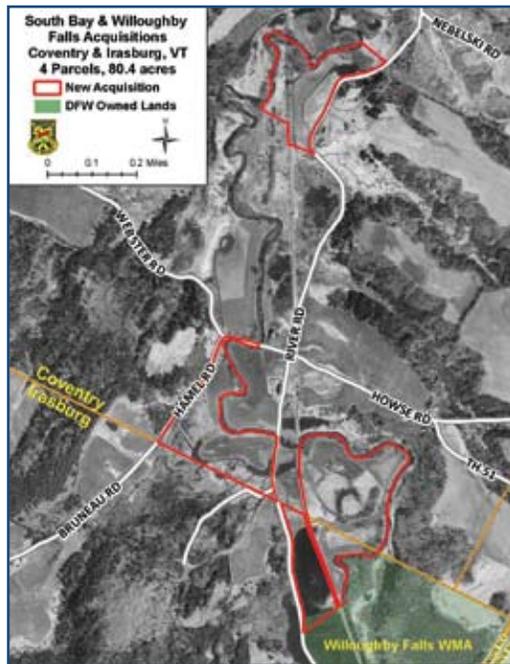
The department has focused on lands directly adjoining existing Wildlife Management Area ownerships, or “in holdings” within WMAs, or other parcels that may have critical resources, such as deer yards, bear habitat or other important features. Public access for additional hunting, fishing, trapping or wildlife viewing opportunities is an important criterion in these reviews. The following are two examples of land acquisitions the department moved forward with in the past year.

Barton River Riparian Land Acquisition Coventry and Irasburg, VT

Four parcels totaling 80.4 acres along the Barton River north of Willoughby Falls WMA were purchased in April 2008. Funding for acquisition of these parcels was provided by the Vermont Duck Stamp Fund, which has raised more than \$3 million since it started in 1986. Only the interest on this fund is spent on wetland conservation projects, and more than 8,000 acres of wetlands and adjacent upland habitat have been conserved, benefitting many species of wildlife.

The Barton River parcels include substantial wet meadow and hayfield acreage adjacent to the Barton River and its oxbow ponds, wetlands and swamps, making them prime nesting habitat for waterfowl, marsh birds and grassland nesting birds. Two of the parcels are additions to South Bay WMA in Coventry, while the other two parcels extend Willoughby Falls WMA riparian land on the Barton River farther northward toward South Bay WMA in Irasburg and Coventry.

The land will be managed to maximize benefits to waterfowl, grassland birds and other wetland wildlife including bitterns, otters, mink and muskrats. Wetlands previously impacted by drainage ditches will be restored to natural flow conditions by plugging the ditches. Buffer strips will be established by



restricting mowing and planting native black willow and silver maple on the riverbanks, and the hayfields will be on a delayed mowing schedule to accommodate nesting waterfowl and grassland birds such as bobolinks.

Clyde River Watershed Lands Conserved Great Bay Hydro Corporation Property Charleston and Derby, VT

Approximately 31.5 acres at three sites in the Clyde River Watershed were acquired from Great Bay Hydro Corporation in 2008. Two of the parcels are developed fishing access areas, 0.6 acre access on Echo Lake (544 acres) and 0.9 acre access on Pensioner Pond (170 acres), both of which the department has leased for public fishing and boating access for many years. Echo Lake provides numerous year round recreational activities due to its size, while Pensioner Pond provides important fishing, waterfowl hunting, and wildlife viewing opportunities. Fee acquisition of these valuable properties ensures that the public will have permanent access for fishing and boating-related recreation on these popular lakes.

The third acquisition is comprised of six parcels ranging in size from one to ten acres, totaling approximately 30 acres of riparian land along the Clyde River. The contiguous parcels are located on both sides of the river, starting from its outlet at Big Salem Lake northwestward to the Vermont Route 105 bridge in Derby. These lands include significant wetland communities, and provide good fishing and wildlife viewing opportunities.

Funding for the purchase and associated costs of these lands was available from proceeds from the sale of Stamford Meadows WMA to the U.S. Forest Service – Green Mountain National Forest (\$285,000), and the Vermont Motorboat Registration Fund (\$220,300). All of the parcels will be managed by the department’s Access Area Program and the fisheries division to provide habitat conservation and public access for angling and boating.



Photo: Paul Hamelin

The Barton River riparian land acquisition secured key nesting habitat for waterfowl and grassland birds along the Barton River.



Photo: Judd Kratzer

Investigations of water quality, angler activity, and trout stocking success were conducted at Bill Sladyk, West Mountain, and Victory Basin Wildlife Management Areas.

Management Highlights *continued from page 2*

- *Friends of WMAs* volunteers controlled 18 acres of invasive plants, released three apple trees and cleared brush on 3,000 feet of access trail.
- Nearly 676 acres of habitat, including uplands, wetlands, and riparian land were added to four WMAs, and two fishing access areas were permanently preserved via FWD acquisition. WMA land acquisition is aided by ANR Lands Administration staff, and many land acquisition projects wouldn't be possible without the aid of partners, notably The Nature Conservancy, Vermont Land Trust, and the Trust for Public Land. (see page 4 for more information)
- The department purchased a portable skidder bridge to demonstrate exemplary timber harvesting practices when conducting habitat management on WMAs.

In the Spotlight: Little Ascutney WMA

By Tim Morton

How do you make a great wildlife habitat better? Active management. How do you balance game species and non-game species needs? By guiding management through cooperative efforts. That's what Springfield District Agency of Natural Resources (ANR) staff have been doing at Little Ascutney WMA in Weathersfield since the timber rights to the parcel were purchased in 1993.

During the first five years a management plan was prepared, public involvement conducted, apple trees released, fields restored, the access road rebuilt, and a number of eroding skid roads repaired. Timber inventory revealed a need for a growth period following forest cutting by the previous owners. During this period, the access road was graveled and rolled each year, a parking lot was built, and meadows were mowed annually, as most are today.

Unique habitat features of the parcel include active beaver wetlands; meadows; wild apple orchards; hickory, oak, aspen, and hophornbeam stands; two rare species of sedge; two rare plant communities; and habitat for the field sparrow, a Vermont Species of Greatest Conservation Need.

Following the Long Range Management Plan (LRMP) schedule, staff began a round of intense management in 2004. Since log trailers were unable to negotiate the steep, winding access road, and access to several proposed patch cuts was excessively wet, a grant was secured from the Ruffed Grouse Society to rebuild several sections of truck road and install ditches and waterbars to dry out wet areas prior to marking the timber for harvest.

From 2005 to 2008, a timber harvest was prepared and implemented by FPR staff to create new early successional habitat in 23 acres of patch cuts and 35 acres of commercial



Photo: Tim Morton

Carefully planned timber harvesting produced these aspen sprouts, increasing the habitat diversity at Little Ascutney WMA.

thinning. Production of mast (acorns, hickory nuts, maple and ash seeds, and cherry fruit) has been enhanced by the pre-commercial thinning of young trees on 70 acres, and dozens of apple trees were freed from competition.

To enhance habitat for field sparrows, one meadow is now mowed every other year, which also increases production of dewberry for other species. Riparian areas were protected by designing patch cuts which gradually move early successional habitat to the upper slopes. To protect rare sedge plants, the timber thinning was conducted only on the soils where the sedge is not found. This left the sedge-hophornbeam forest type in an ideal condition for wild turkeys, which prefer to feed in an open understory.

The WMA continues to be a favorite of local hunters, bird watchers and hikers. In 2009 an updated LRMP is being drafted for the parcel for the next 20-year period, and staff look forward to building on their successes here.

Commercial Wildlife Habitat Management

Commercial wildlife habitat management activities can enhance forest wildlife habitat while removing merchantable wood products. Commercial logging operations also improve public access for fish and wildlife based activities by helping the department develop or maintain WMA roads, culverts, bridges, and herbaceous openings.

All revenue generated by the commercial sale of timber on WMAs is reinvested into the management or acquisition of these lands. Timber sale receipts from commercial forest management activities on WMAs have increased sharply in recent years.

In 2003 the department entered into a partnership with the Ruffed Grouse Society (RGS) to address a backlog of planned timber harvests on WMAs, and to accelerate the

level of non-commercial habitat management activities. The 2004 Legislature appropriated \$40,000 in capital funds to the department to facilitate these activities. An additional \$50,000 was appropriated in 2005. The RGS partnership and the capital appropriations have been productive, resulting in a dramatic increase in WMA timber harvests and noncommercial habitat management activities during FY05 through FY08.

Table 1 reports the commercial wildlife habitat management activities on WMAs in FY08. Variations in harvesting volumes across different regions of the state are a result of disparities in state-owned timber acreage and accessibility on WMAs, staffing levels, stand conditions, and work priorities. Table 2 indicates the acreage and minimum projected income for 14 timber harvests that were active, sold, or about to be sold on ten WMAs as of January 1, 2009.

Table 1. Wildlife Habitat Timber Harvests on Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department WMAs FY08

	District I Springfield	District II Rutland	District III Barre	District IV Essex Jct.	District V St. Johnsbury	State Totals
Fee Acres Harvested (#)	80.0	0.0	75.0	16.0	487.5	658.5
Board Feet (MBF)	170.0	0.0	120.0	11.1	589.9	891.0
Cords (#)	300.0	0.0	500.0	53.0	2,154.7	3,007.7
Program Income (\$) ^c	\$60,725.74	\$4,000 ^a	\$43,932.40	\$3,239.94	\$182,684.19	\$294,582
Non-fee Acres Harvested (#) ^b	105.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	105.0

^a Includes pre-harvest payments ^b Timber rights privately owned

^c All revenues generated on WMAs go back into the management of these properties.

Table 2. Fourteen Timber Harvests Active, Sold, or Ready to Sell on Ten Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department WMAs as of January 1, 2009.

District	Number of Sales	Clear-cut Acres	Selective Acres	Acres Total	Minimum \$ Bid or Sold Value*
1-Springfield	2	38	73	111	\$57,640
2-Rutland	3	30	180	210	\$93,079
3-Barre	1	0	117	117	\$60,000
4-Essex	1	40	107	147	\$100,547
5-St. Johnsbury	7	39	543	582	\$209,111
Totals	14	147	1,020	1,167	\$520,377

*Based on actual price of purchased sales or minimum acceptable bid for sales ready to sell. Revenues subject to winter operating conditions; total income may not be realized until June 30, 2011.