



MANCHESTER ESSEX CONSERVATION TRUST

PERMANENTLY PRESERVING NATURAL BEAUTY, WILDLIFE HABITAT AND RESOURCES
SPRING 2025



Photo Credit: Emilie Wilder
and Zoo New England Conservation

Two Acquisitions Completed this Spring One in Essex and One in Manchester

When MECT adopted a strategic plan including “acceleration of conservation acquisitions”, we never imagined that we’d be closing on two purchases in a week! These two projects’ paths-to-purchase were very different, and those differences underscore the importance of the community’s support for our Save Our Woods Capital Campaign.

Fire Tower Parcels in Essex... The acquisition of these parcels follows a decade long discussion with the owners. As the family reached a decision to sell, they afforded us six months for fundraising for the project, time in which we asked, and you responded! We received amazing support from a broad group of donors - ranging from north shore mountain biking groups to Manchester residents aware of the impact on the Sawmill Brook watershed and cold-water fishery flowing into Manchester, and residents of Essex who value the conservation values of the woodlands and wetlands. We also received a substantial contribution from our colleagues and

(continued on Page 5)

WANTED

Blanding’s Turtle Sightings

A rare and threatened turtle species lives in our midst. You can impact its future right here in Essex or Manchester. They are known for their longevity, but they are no match for vehicular traffic. Help us identify where these turtles are crawling by participating in our TurtleWatch. They are on the move in June, seeking nesting spots and summer getaways. Your sightings are a key to their survival. Have you seen one this spring or in the past few years?

Take a picture! Send your sighting info to conserve@mect.org.

Learn more about our TurtleWatch mect.org/TurtleWatch



The Fire Tower parcels are named after one of several trails that are accessed through the gated Fire Tower road on Southern Avenue, and near Laurel Lane in Essex. Dark Tower and Bullseye trails also pass through these parcels.

Blanding’s Turtles *By Alec Woolf, MECT GIS and Conservation Data Manager*

The Blanding’s turtle (*Emydoidea blandingii*) is a medium-sized, semi-aquatic freshwater species found in parts of the Midwest, Northeast, and Canada. It typically grows to a length of 6 to 9 inches. Its upper shell, or carapace, is black with yellow speckles, while the lower shell, or plastron, is yellow with dark patches. Its primary habitat includes wetlands such as ponds, bogs, and marshes, though it is also known to travel over land at times. The Blanding’s turtle has a varied diet, feeding on frogs, crayfish, aquatic insects, snails, and tadpoles. By preying on these organisms, they help regulate populations and contribute to overall ecosystem health. Blanding’s Turtle habitat characteristics consists of bodies of water with emergent vegetation such as sedges and cattails. Throughout the year Blanding’s Turtles can travel to several different wetlands looking for food.

Blanding’s Turtles overwinter in the deepest parts of wetlands. They become active as early as mid-March but remain near wetlands until temperatures rise. Nesting season occurs from late spring to mid-summer, with females laying clutches of approximately 12-14 eggs. The incubation period lasts between 45 and 80 days, and hatchlings emerge in the fall. The sex of the offspring is temperature-dependent, with warmer nest temperatures producing females and cooler temperatures producing males. Juvenile Blanding’s Turtles face high predation rates from various animals, including chipmunks (*Tamias spp.*), Raccoons (*Procyon lotor*), and

American crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*). Due to their slow growth rate, they do not reach sexual maturity until between 14 and 20 years of age—a factor that contributes to their vulnerability as a species.

The Blanding’s turtle has experienced significant population declines across its range and is labeled as Endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of

Nature (IUCN). In the Northeast, the Blanding’s Turtle population is less than 3,000 individuals. The Blanding’s Turtle is protected in every state and province it is found in. The primary driver of this decline is habitat loss and fragmentation, which forces turtles to cross roads, leading to high rates of road mortality. Habitat fragmentation also isolates populations, reducing genetic diversity and further exacerbating their decline. Additionally,

the loss of habitat due to human development increases predators in Blanding’s Turtle habitat. Other threats include the degradation of nesting sites, illegal poaching for the pet trade, and off-road activities like ATV use, which can inadvertently injure or kill turtles. Additionally, climate change poses a risk by altering sex ratios due to temperature-dependent sex determination.

Conservation efforts are in place to protect this threatened species of turtle. The Headstart



This is what a mature Blanding’s turtle looks like in the field. This beauty was found in a town north of Essex with the help of a wildlife biologist who is guiding our MECT surveys.

Alec Woolf Alec attended the University of Vermont where he obtained a Bachelor of Science in Wildlife & Fisheries Biology. During his undergraduate career, he worked on a number of different projects with the Vermont Fish & Wildlife studying turtle and bat species of conservation concern. Following his completion at the University of Vermont, Alec gained field experience studying threatened and endangered bird species. Alec attended Antioch University Antioch University, completing a Master of Science in environmental studies with a Conservation Biology concentration.

1. Check out our TurtleWatch page to learn more and to get alerts from MECT when turtles are on the move in our area, and learn what type of habitat they are most likely visiting as the seasons and weather change. These turtles are known to travel over a mile, covering an average of 40 acres during a single season, and they keep traveling at a turtle’s speed into their eightieth and ninetieth years! We expect them to be active in June, especially on rainy evenings. We are not certain if the cool spring will shift this activity. www.mect.org/TurtleWatch

2. Take a picture. Report turtle sightings. These will help us document the extent of their territories. Send photos to us at conserve@mect.org with information about the date and location. Blanding’s have a distinctive yellow throat and lower jaw. We have received word that they have been seen in Essex this spring! Great fun for the family! First three youth (under 18) to submit observations will receive ice cream gift cards!

3. Learn why this is important NOW. The MA Natural Heritage Endangered Species Program tracks and protects endangered species in our state. The last time someone reported a Blanding’s Turtle here was many years ago - though the program believes that they certainly live in our area today. The program is tight on resources, and has not dedicated them to turtles, salamanders and other endangered species in our area. They’ve remarked that this region is far away from their headquarters. So it’s up to us to document the local population and make sure the turtles live among us as safely as possible. We believe that protecting the small populations of Blanding’s Turtles that live in our preserved areas - and outside of our preserved areas is important - we just need to know where they are, so that we can help! These turtles are sensitive to loss of safe connectivity in their territory between their aquatic habitats, and their nesting habitats. Depending on where they are documented we can consider a number of mitigation efforts like creating suitable nesting habitat on conservation land and road-free paths to get there.

(Blanding’s turtles continued)

(HATCH) program helps improve hatchling survival by raising them indoors from autumn until late spring. During this time hatchlings grow exponentially so when they are released, they are significantly larger than normally would be at their age. Other strategies to preserve this species include population studies, preventing illegal poaching, restoring and protecting wetlands, and reducing road mortality by deploying turtle crossing signs. Additionally, organizations are working with landowners to enhance habitats for wildlife. Furthermore, public education and outreach programs are essential in raising awareness about the importance of protecting Blanding’s turtles and their habitats, as well as promoting responsible behavior within local communities.

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Stewardship is about more than just blazing trails in the woods

By Tom Barrieau, MECT Trustee, Stewardship Committee Chair

As a conservation trust dedicated to protecting the natural spaces that enrich our communities, stewardship is an important part of our mission. Often, this involves working in partnership with local government to ensure that our activities comply with various state and federal environmental laws.

Sometimes this work is pretty simple. A case in point is the recent approval by the Essex Conservation Commission (ConsComm) for moving a five hundred foot section of the Homestead Trail that has become increasingly inundated due to nearby beaver activity. Because this work falls within the 100 foot buffer zone adjacent to a wetland resource area, it must comply with the MA Wetlands Protection Act. After demonstrating a compelling need to do this work and demonstrating due ecological consideration for how it will be done, we were granted approval and hope to complete this project within the next month.

At other times, the work is more complex and moves on a longer timeline. Our plans to build a new bridge across a wetland resource on the Dug Hill Trail in Manchester is our best example here. While the origin of this story is similar (i.e.,inundation of the existing trail due to beaver activity), the solution is much more complex. The proposed site for this new bridge, selected in consultation with the Manchester ConsComm, will require an unsupported span — over 30 feet! As such, we need to bring in outside consultation to help develop our plans, survey the site professionally, and submit all proposed work to the Manchester ConsComm for approval. We’re excited about this project and grateful to our community partners for their support. Stay tuned—we’ll be providing regular updates as this work progresses.

MERSD students volunteered for a clean-up project as part of their Civics class curriculum. They cleared trash and opened up an overgrown trail to a quiet alcove that we conserved several years ago at 25 Crooked Lane. Many thanks to the young crew, their teacher and the Manchester DPW who removed the collected trash.



This clean-up supports Location #35 on our 60 Places for 60 Years. This list was curated by MECT Trustee Jeff Cochand in honor of MECT’S 60 Years of mission-focused conservation. Visit our [MECT.org/60Places](https://www.mect.org/60Places) to view the list, and find directions to each special place, as well as google map supported hikes. Check out #40 Laurel Notch and #42 Hemlock Glen nearby in Western Woods for mountain laurel blooms.



(Two acquisitions this Spring, continued)

friends at Essex County Greenbelt who will hold a conservation restriction on the land. The result was 100% project-specific funding under our Save Our Woods Capital Campaign.

... and a small but significant piece of Shingle Place Hill in Manchester

In contrast to the decade long interest in the Fire Tower parcels, we acted quickly to purchase a small but strategic parcel on Shingle Place Hill to bolster our ongoing defense. This parcel abuts the land that we are defending from a large, proposed, environmentally damaging development. With outstanding cooperation from the sellers, the transaction and due diligence were completed in less than 6 weeks. We were able to fund

this project due to past contributions to our Save Our Woods Capital Campaign. These undesigated land conservation and defense funds increase our flexibility to meet market demands quickly to acquire land. Each gift to the Save Our Woods campaign fortifies our future land conservation capacity. We love how the community has embraced this campaign and placed their hopes and dreams for future land conservation in our hands, as we continue our mission of sixty-two years.

As we continue to research ownership of parcels and communicate with owners and their families - a hallmark of our success for over 60 years - having funds available, and a community that believes in our mission makes all the difference. You can learn more about our Save Our Woods Campaign at www.mect.org/SaveOurWoods.

Defense of Shingle Place Hill: Next Steps

It seems odd not to have the defense of Shingle Place Hill on the front page of our newsletter, as it has been for years. This is NOT a result of any conclusions in the defense of this hillside adjacent to hundreds of acres of conservation land. We are currently waiting for our Superior Court case to be reviewed, and as we wait, we are accelerating our conservation work in other areas.

After the Manchester Zoning Board of Appeals denied a comprehensive permit, the developer appealed to the Housing Appeals Committee (HAC) and, as expected, the HAC overturned the Manchester ZBA's DENIAL for the monstrous development on Shingle Place Hill, last November. After that, MECT, The Ten Persons Group, and the Town of Manchester appealed the HAC decision to the Superior Court. In March, the assistant attorney general requested a consolidation of the appeals, and the HAC filed the record with the court late in May. We await more details and dates.

"What is the worst thing about the planned

Shingle Hill development plan? Location, location, location. This proposed development would negatively affect the vernal pools, watershed, and cold water fishery for sea run brook trout on and adjacent to the property and have an outsize impact on the conservation land next door. This is the wrong project in the wrong place for both the environment and town", says Matt Plum, MECT President.

"We are most concerned about the environmental impact on the adjacent areas. The large, proposed structure will cause irreparable damage to wetlands, animal habitat, and a popular natural recreation area that provides enjoyment for thousands of visitors a year. The enormous building is so out of character with the area, and will only contribute 34 affordable homes. While we recognize the need for affordable housing - we believe that the community's strong support for the approved efforts to build affordable homes closer to the center of town and available services is the best long-term direction", adds Mory Creighton, MECT Vice-President .

Kestrel Educational Adventures

By Julie Kent, MECT Staff

MECT recently attended Kestrel Educational Adventures' inspiring Student Work Showcase. The event celebrated the creative discoveries and diligent work of local student scientists who spent the season exploring and documenting their natural surroundings.

Young scientists of all ages contributed original, insightful projects—from beautifully detailed field guides and imaginative maps crafted by younger students, to compelling mini-documentaries and informative websites produced by older participants. The showcase provided an interactive space where students

presented their findings and creations, offering a firsthand glimpse into their connection with nature.

It was inspiring to see our future conservationists passionately sharing their knowledge and enthusiasm for the environment. MECT is proud to support Kestrel Education Adventures through education grants for Manchester and Essex students, fulfilling the educational focus of our mission to mentor the next generation of environmental stewards. This event powerfully demonstrated the importance and impact of encouraging curiosity and creativity in exploring our natural world.



On a weekday during April spring break, we invited families to join us on a vernal pool hike in the Western Woods with Rick Roth of the Cape Ann Vernal Ponds team. A log crossing proved to be one of the adventurous attractions, and the children were able to look for fairy shrimp, wood frog tadpoles and spotted salamander eggs from that vantage point. Rick caught a few fairy shrimp for close up observations, and they were quickly released to the pond. Other Spring Hikes included animal tracking and botany hikes on our Fire Tower parcels, a photography hike with Michael Prince, and digital detox hike to Millstone Hill. Don't want to miss hike announcements or reminders? Sign up for HikeAlerts at mect.org/SaveTheDate.

Photo credits: Mike Dyer, Former MECT President and Norm Strahle, MECT Development Manager.

Brookwood School's Sustainable Future Fest

Last fall we participated in the renewed Sustainable Future Fest at Brookwood School in Manchester and we look forward to future fests. "The heart of Brookwood School's Sustainable Future Fest lies in inspiring the next generation to take meaningful action to protect our planet. The Manchester Essex Conservation Trust embodies this mission through its tireless work preserving our local landscapes and fostering environmental awareness. Your presence at the event not only enriched the experience but also exemplified what it means to turn passion into impact. We are deeply grateful for your leadership in conservation and your partnership in inspiring others to care for our world. Thank you for being such a vital force for change in our community." — Jon Bartlett, Head of School

Join Us in Welcoming Our Newest MECT Team Members

Gail Sorenson "We're lucky to have Gail. Her knowledge and experience in the non profit sector in general and local Massachusetts conservation organizations in particular have helped us look at "best practices" in our financial recordkeeping and reporting. And with her successful installation of a new accounting system, we are now able to keep the board informed of our resources on a real time basis. She's been a great addition to our team", asserts Jonathan Calder, MECT Treasurer.



Gail joined MECT in 2023 offering a wealth of bookkeeping experience and a commitment to continue to keep our finances shipshape. Gale worked with our treasurer to migrate MECT's finances to the QuickBooks platform, allowing greater speed and efficiency in our operations. During her tenure at MECT, Gail has become a well liked and valuable member of our staff and team bringing her accounting expertise, enthusiasm for all things MECT, and a terrific sense of humor to our office.

Gail graduated Salem State College in 1988 with a degree in accounting. Gail's career arc saw her auditing several regional banks as well working for a few bygone North Shore institutions many of us will remember: The Hilltop Steakhouse and Wonderland Greyhound Park. She later joined North Shore Bank where she worked for seven years before the birth of her children. When her son was five months old Gail reentered the workforce and shortly thereafter, the Ipswich River Watershed Association became her first non-profit client. She's also worked for Essex County Greenbelt and found MECT through references from both of those other conservation organizations.

Q: What do you like best about your work at MECT?
A: "First of all, it's just the staff. I love working with them. They are all so nice, and I feel like I learn so much from them. Also, I just love what MECT does. I admire the hard work and seeing the great results they get."

Q: What do you like to do outdoors for fun?
A: "I love going for walks and hikes and my vegetable garden!"

Julie Kent joined us in May and is excited to contribute to MECT's mission as our Communications & Engagement Coordinator. An Essex resident, Julie has a deep appreciation for the diverse landscapes of Cape Ann, from its lush woodlands to its sprawling marshlands. Her passion for land conservation is fueled by a strong connection to this unique region, where she finds inspiration in the natural beauty that surrounds her. With a strong background in mission-driven communications, Julie has honed her ability to enhance organizational missions and engage communities through thoughtful, impactful messaging. Her work is rooted in the belief that preserving our lands is vital for both ecological health and community well being. Whether she's exploring the wooded trails with her dog, boating along the marshes of the Essex River, or advocating for sustainable land use, Julie is committed to protecting and restoring Cape Ann's natural beauty—returning ecosystems to their original condition for the benefit of generations to come. "Julie jumped right in, quite literally, with waders on, to join us on our Blanding's turtle surveys during her first week. She's going to fit in well," revealed Executive Director, Patrice Murphy.



Photo Credit: Michael Prince



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Your membership fuels our mission. Thanks to the incredible support of our community of members, MECT has achieved some incredible milestones:

- 1800+ acres of land permanently protected
- 67 miles of trails open to the public
- 1100+ feet of Sawmill Brook riverbank protected
- 17 vernal pools certified since 2021 and 14 in process
- 366 acres state designated rare species habitat
- 100's of people at our hikes and events annually

Yet our work is far from complete. Our ecologically vital lands, trails, and streams straddle a patchwork of parcels – many protected and many not. With ever-increasing pressures on our cherished open spaces, time is of the essence. Please join or renew your membership by sending in a check using the enclosed envelope or donate online at www.MECT.org/join.

