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Nature Conservancy tracks wildlife movement in forested areas

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WORTHINGTON — In an attempt to document the presence and movement of wildlife in selected forested areas, the Nature Conservancy is conducting a winter animal tracking survey.

Laura Marx, forest ecologist for the Nature Conservancy, is leading the project to ensure that animals are able to move between the Green Mountains in Vermont and the Hudson River Valley in New York.

The study area includes the Westfield River Highlands in Huntington, Worthington and Middlefield, and the Berkshire-Taconic Landscape in Sheffield and Great Barrington.

“We had a good sense of what animals we would see, but we needed the actual numbers to record and analyze the data,” Marx said.

Marx and a team of three trackers were accompanied by a reporter last month on one of the study sites in the Hiram H. Fox Wildlife Management Area in Worthington owned by the Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The team had previously explored the area and marked it with pink flagging tied to trees. Automated motion-sensor video cameras were also deployed at strategic points to capture images of wildlife in 25-second videos.

Jessica Applin, a graduate student at Antioch New England University in Keene, N.H., meticulously recorded data when she or volunteer



tracker Nancy Rich came upon tracks in the snow. Applin was also using the information for her master's thesis.

Eric Aldrich, a marketing specialist for the Nature Conservancy, was also on hand to help locate and follow tracks in the freshly fallen snow and to make a video of the study.

Dressed in bright yellow and orange vests, the team followed the flagging on the trees, trekking up and down hills and over icy logs across a stream, diligently searching for tracks in the 18-degree weather.

The team heads out to the study areas whenever there is a good coating of snow on the ground.



“We see a lot of animal sign other than tracks, but this study is really just looking at tracks in the snow,” Marx said as the team passed by a tree where bark had recently been stripped by a browsing moose.

Applin said that in the beginning of the study, they saw bear and bobcat images on one of the wildlife cameras.

“Recently we have seen tons of otter and fisher tracks as well as coyote, deer and squirrels,” Applin said as she stood over a weasel track. “Finding good tracks like this makes it worth going out in the cold,” Applin said.

As the study covers both public and private land, Applin said that much of the work for the project revolved around securing permission from landowners.

“We have had some people say no, but most are happy to find out what wildlife they actually have on their property,” Applin said. “Some landowners have even shown us around and told us where they have seen particular animals.”

Once completed, the tracking information will be combined with data collected from a continuing animal road-kill survey, photographs and videos taken by the automated wildlife cameras.

Marx said the study will cost \$40,000. “The project is being funded by the Nature Conservancy and the Westfield River Wild and Scenic Advisory Committee,” she added.

One of the goals is to help state transportation officials about the use of fencing, road repairs, changes in the curbs, culverts or bridges that might make key crossing spots safer for wildlife.

And the tracking study could serve as a pilot for similar work in other areas, such as near the Quabbin Reservoir or between forest cores along the Massachusetts Turnpike.

“Its funny how you can live out here for 20 years and still have no idea of the animals that are living all around you,” Rich said. “Getting into the woods and tracking is a great way to see what animals are here, what they are doing, and stories play out as you follow their tracks.”