

Connectivity project aims to make roads safer

Text & Photo
By JASON KAPLAN

One of the worst experiences for a motorist is running over a furry little creature or crashing into a deer that seems to appear out of nowhere. A long-term goal of the Black Rock Forest Consortium is to create structures that will allow wildlife to safely cross highways, much like the landscaped overpasses seen in many countries around the world, as well as parts of the United States and Canada.

"Black Rock Forest has been interested in wildlife connectivity for many years," said the forest's executive director William Schuster. "Connectivity is a measure of how well landscapes facilitate movement. Habitat fragmentation and loss, an issue in our region, reduce connectivity. Since all things move, maintaining and enhancing connectivity is a worthy conservation goal."

Researchers are now entering the second year of the Hudson Highlands Wildlife Connectivity Project having completed the first of three phases. They aim to quantify landscape connectivity in the region and provide

science-backed strategies for maintaining and improving connectivity, while learning more about a once rare but returning carnivore, the fisher.

The first phase entailed recording more than 6,000 passes by mammals last winter including: bobcat, coyote, red fox, and fishers. Early results suggest highways are

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negatively affecting the carnivore populations.

This was completed using motion activated cameras.

"This gives us a coarse view of where species reside, giving us important insights into species distributions," Schuster said. "We will then follow with active GPS tracking of individual animals. For this we will deploy state-of-the-art, GPS-enabled tracking collars on fishers (and possibly bobcats) to re-

cord in high resolution where animals move. From this we can better understand their decision making processes, including which habitats they prefer, where they cross roads, and where roads impede their movements."

The data will be used to understand which paths and movement routes animals prefer. A map will be produced to show us areas with a lot of movement (i.e., corridors) and places where animals want to go but cannot (i.e. barriers).

Interstate 87 is the largest concern, but the study does not focus on the highway specifically. Efforts will highlight potential issues, as well as mitigation opportunities, on all local, county, and state roads.

The project is expected to take another two to three years to complete. At which point the information will be shared with other conservation organizations, state agencies, and the public in an effort to seek help to reduce the impact of roads and thus make them safer for animals and drivers.

To date, the project has cost \$127,000, including \$50,000 for equipment and the balance mainly for salary and



The Hudson Highlands Wildlife Connectivity Project is a three-year study of movement among animals in Black Rock Forest. The goal is to make roads safer for animals and drivers by creating landscaped crossings over highways.

benefits for expert wildlife ecologist Dr. Scott LaPoint. Looking ahead to year two, a \$5,000 private contribution has already been received,

as well as a pledge from a foundation which provided a grant to support the first year of the project. The consortium is seeking \$100,000 to

fund the second year of the project. Contributions from the public are welcome. To donate, visit <https://>