

April 13, 2026

Rye Trails Assessment

The report authored by Rachel Stevens, Birch Tree Consulting, is a science-based report assessing the impact of trails on wildlife on Rye conservation properties. This letter is not an attempt to dismiss the science, but rather to add some important data points to be considered.

Let's consider how much conservation land in Rye is available for wildlife to inhabit. Although Ms. Stevens states that there are 54 town-owned properties in Rye, the 2024 Rye Town Report shows 88 properties either owned by the town or on which the town has conservation easements. These properties comprise about 1,100 acres, of which some 650 acres have recreational trails. That leaves approximately 450 acres for wildlife that are unimpeded by trails. Granted, some of these properties are small, but the same report shows that there are 38 properties 5 acres or greater in size and only 9 of these have trails. That means that 76% of the larger conservation properties have no trails impacting wildlife.

The NH Nature Conservancy and the NH Wildlife Action Plan mapped the mainly unfragmented areas they designate as conservation focus areas for wildlife (trails report pages 15-17). The Rye properties with trails comprise only a small fraction of these unfragmented blocks and important wildlife habitat areas. The same study also identified important wildlife travel corridors and the only trails in Rye within one of these corridors are the small trail in Marden Woods and a portion of the trails at Cedar Run.

These additional data points indicate that Rye has significant undeveloped conservation and private land available for wildlife to live undisturbed.

Given the parameters above, how are the wildlife in Rye doing? Comments and photos on local social media report frequent sightings of bobcats, deer, turkey, foxes, eagles and so on. But that is anecdotal and not quantifiable. Let's keep it scientific, and look at the white-tailed deer population in Rye, which is in NH Wildlife Management Unit M. The 2025 Wildlife Harvest Summary compiled by the NH Department of Fish and Wildlife shows that Rye had the 6th largest deer harvest per square mile of any town in NH. Rye has been in the top 10 of deer per acre harvested of all NH towns for the last several years.

The same NHPG report has a desired outcome for deer populations in each management unit to keep the populations sustainably abundant. NH Fish & Game recommends a population decrease of -44% in Unit M, Rye's management unit, to keep the herd at optimum size and health.

These data points suggest that wildlife is abundant in Rye, so much so that, in the case of deer, NH Fish & Game recommends severely reducing the population.

Having said all that, it's the role of the Conservation Commission to steward Rye's conservation properties in accordance with NH RSA 36-A, namely "for the proper utilization and protection of the natural resources and for the protection of watershed resources". RSA 36-A goes on to say that the commission "may recommend...a program for the protection, development or better utilization of all such areas". Historically, the Rye Conservation Commission (RCC) has considered allowing some public recreation on some conservation land as proper utilization of those properties so long as the natural resources are protected. I'm glad that the RCC engaged Rachel Stevens to look at the trails, so the commission has the benefit of professional insight.

Rachel Stevens states that her ideal recommendations "are written from a purely scientific and ecological perspective". She then recognizes "that local social and political factors, such as history of trail use" may mean that the ideal recommendation of trail closures are not implemented. The citizens of Rye and the Conservation Commission know these historical factors well and I hope, in some cases, they use them to consider the alternative solutions recommended by Ms. Stevens.

Three trail properties are recommended to be left unchanged: Brown Lane Farm, Marden Woods and Rand Forest. The rest are recommended to have some trail closures or relocations.

I believe that the alternative recommendations on each of the remaining properties will accomplish the goal of limiting the impact of our trails on wildlife while allowing reasonable recreational use by the public.

Airfield/Whitehorse

Airfield/Whitehorse is a large tract of about 104 acres. It borders a large tract of undisturbed private land. The ideal recommendation calls for the closure of the south, or back side, of the pond trail as well as the closure of the northernmost trail which is a short cul-de-sac. This makes good sense as it will protect the aquatic wildlife and waterfowl breeding and nesting areas on the pond. The cul-de-sac is hardly ever used.

However, the ideal recommendation also closes the Green Trail which is an old woods road connecting Pasture Lane with the rest of the property. This road has been used for decades by horses from neighboring farms. Sam DeMarco has been helping the RCC with trail maintenance for as long as he has been a neighbor. The road sees very light foot use and the horse riders only use it when the road and adjoining trails are dry. The alternative

recommendation keeps the Green Trail. I believe this is the solution that makes the most sense, historically and practically.

Seavey Acres

Seavey Acres is about 60 acres and includes almost 20 acres of saltmarsh. The ideal recommendation calls for the closure of the trail that runs along Berry's Brook. This is a popular trail for its scenic views of the brook although there is a section that needs maintenance since it is frequently wet. The alternative recommendation allows the brook trail to remain open. Both recommendations call for the closure of a small spur trail. The use of the property is limited by the small, seasonally wet parking lot. Consequently, the public use is comparatively light.

The alternative management choice allows the popular brook trail to be enjoyed by the public. I believe this makes the most sense, particularly since the trails see light use. Requiring dogs to be leashed on the brook trail would help minimize disturbance to wildlife.

Cedar Run/Jim Raynes Forest

This is the newest trail system that the RCC manages. The combined acreage is about 123 acres and it abuts large tracts of undeveloped and unfragmented land. The ideal recommendation calls for the closure of the Yellow and Orange trails, leaving just the Red trail.

The alternative recommendation keeps the orange trail as well as the Red trail. I believe this makes the most sense since there is reasonably good parking on Signature Lane to access the Orange trailhead. The RCC has also invested in bog bridges on that trail and the Orange trail allows a view of the Atlantic White Cedar forest.

Town Forest

Rachel Stevens decided to divide the Town Forest into two tracts. The Town Forest is approximately 200 acres and is the largest property managed by the RCC. The ideal recommendation closes the Yellow trail and the Green trail. The Yellow trail is less than 100 yards from and parallel to the White trail. Closing it will protect a tract of wetland in the Town Forest between the Cemetery and the property boundary to the east.

The alternative recommendation keeps the northern section of the Green trail and the Varrell Woods entrance on Washington Road. This option is preferable to complete removal since it allows continued access from Washington Road. I hope the RCC also considers a permanent leash rule on the Green trail instead of closure.

In summary, it is my hope that the Conservation Commission considers the significant trailless, unfragmented blocks of undeveloped land, both public and private, that exist in Rye. These areas are allowing wildlife to flourish. The trails on Rye conservation land have some impact on wildlife in the specific locations cited; however, using the alternative recommendations of the report will accomplish the desired goal of accommodating some human use while allowing wildlife to use those same properties to live and reproduce. Wherever the alternative solution may not give the desired protection, the commission can consider restrictions on dogs, bikes, or seasonal closures to protect wildlife.

Sincerely,

Mike

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