

**2023 Little Big Forest Annual Report**  
**Submitted February 4, 2024**

In April 2021, three adjacent lots totaling 40-acres of ecologically significant, undeveloped land with 4,000 feet of shoreline at the southern end of Highland Lake went on the market.

The Conservation Commission investigated what could be done to acquire, protect and manage this land for the benefit of the residents, JFES students, and camp owners on Highland Lake, and to preserve the land's outstanding wildlife habitat and other natural resource values.

In May, 2022, the Conservation Commission, with blessings from the BOS, obtained a signed Option Agreement (OA) from the landowner to purchase the property. It took 10 months of intense negotiations to obtain.

**Key provisions of the OA included:**

- A nonrefundable Option Fee of \$25,000, applicable to the purchase price, due at the execution of the OA;
- Raising or receiving commitments for 75% of the funds needed to purchase (and close) by December 1, 2022;
- With the successful completion of the two aforementioned requirements, the OA was extended to June 30, 2023; it required a second nonrefundable \$25,000 payment, also applicable to the purchase price;
- The final deadline for compliance with the terms of the OA required that all funds required to purchase and close needed to be raised (or received commitments) on or before May 30, 2023!

As we entered the 2023 New Year, we had raised \$1,206,221 towards the fundraising goal of \$1.5 million (\$1.3 million purchase price; \$100,000 towards project costs; \$100,000 for a Stewardship Fund), however, we still had a daunting \$200,000 amount to raise in 5 months. We were not sure where this would come from! The following are some extraordinary examples of how the fundraising goal was achieved:

Two grants from the Bailey Foundation in November, 2022 and January of 2023 were critical in attracting the interest of 3 other "Friends of the Little Big Forest" where an \$110,000 match was created. This match became the incentive for private donations that provided another \$110,000 over the next 5 months.

A front page article in the February 18-19<sup>th</sup>, 2023 weekend edition of the Keene Sentinel increased public awareness of this exciting project.

On a drizzly, cold day on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023, JFES 3<sup>rd</sup> grader Jaxon Leonard organized a LBF fundraiser at the fire station. After 2 hours of selling hot dogs and other raffle items, he presented con com chair Geoff Jones with a paper bag containing \$935 dollars!

This amount was matched by the \$110,000 matching grant the 4 Friends of the LBF created. That resulted in doubling Jaxon's total to \$1,870.

A woman from Westmoreland, with friends in Stoddard, read the story about the LBF in the February Keene Sentinel that gathered her interest. When she saw an April FB post about Jaxon's

stellar effort, she knew she HAD to become involved. She sent a check for \$1,500 to the LBF fund, citing Jaxon and the JFES's student's inspiring efforts. Her donation was matched, increasing it to \$3,000. When combined with Jaxon's fundraising effort, JFES students helped raise over \$5,000. In 2022, 5<sup>th</sup> grader Mason Bodner raised \$395 from a JFES movie night and Olde Home Days lemonade campaign.



As the May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023 deadline loomed, the fundraising goal was \$92,000 short of the \$1.5 million dollar goal.

In early April, 2023, with the help from Lynnette Batt, a regional manager with the Trust for Public Lands, a capstone grant requesting \$92,000 from an anonymous foundation was submitted by the chair of the conservation commission (with fingers crossed).

As a safety net, Article 24 was placed on the town warrant for "the Town to raise and appropriate \$63,000 in support of the purchase of Lot 125-021 & 020 and Lot 121-001 totaling 40 acres more or less (the Little Big Forest). It passed unanimously at the May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023 Annual Town Meeting, with the promise to pay back the town by years end. *Fortunately this appropriation was never needed!*

In the next day's mail, the commission received a confirmation letter stating that the \$92,000 grant had been approved. The Philanthropic Advisor cited the James Faulkner Elementary School student's enthusiasm and involvement in the fundraiser as one of the reasons for the grant.

From the official signing of the Option Agreement by the landowner Mr. Wilson, on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022 to the May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023 confirmation letter from an Anonymous Foundation in Maine, in a mere 12+ months, the Stoddard conservation commission raised \$1,524,000 million dollars, meeting all of the "impossible" deadlines and successfully closing on July 7, 2023 with the assistance of Tina Foster and Maine Street Title Services, LLC of Peterborough, NH. Land trusts, well versed in this process, usually plan on 24 to 30+ months to raise and complete similar projects.



### **Closing on July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023:**

*Left to right: Chris Madden, chair BOS; Jillian Exel, realtor; Geoff Jones, forester and Stoddard Conservation Commission chair; Jason Kovarik, Stoddard Conservation Commission; Michelle Pong, Stoddard Town Administrator; Landscape portrait of the LBF by local artist Richard Whitney.*

### **Funding came from the following:**

**USFS:** In June, 2022, the Little Big Forest was awarded a \$600,000 from the USFS Community Forest Grant Program. The LBF was one of only 12 projects funded nationwide; of the 12 projects funded, it is one of only FIVE to receive the maximum amount of \$600K!!

**N.H. Land and Community Heritage Investment Program (LCHIP):** On November 16, 2022 the LCHIP Board of Directors unanimously awarded the Little Big Forest a \$400,000 grant from LCHIP. It was the largest grant awarded in the 2023 round. (At the Sept. 2023 field review by the LCIP site team, I was told if “they” awarded points for passion, they would triple our score.....they must have awarded those points)!

**NH State Conservation Committee Conservation Moose Plate Grant Program:** On November 21, 2022 the Little Big Forest project was awarded the full SCC 2023 grant award of \$30,000!

**Local Groups:** The following local foundations and organizations contributed to the Little Big Forest:

- ***The Bailey Foundation*** (Four \$20K donations: 1<sup>st</sup> on Nov. 22, 2022; the 2<sup>nd</sup> on Jan. 13, 2023; the 3<sup>rd</sup> on December 2023, the 4<sup>th</sup> on Jan. 2, 2024): The 5<sup>th</sup> donation of \$20,000 will arrive in December, 2024.
- ***The Putnam Foundation*** on Nov. 3, 2022: \$25,000;
- ***Ashuelot River Hydro*** pledge in Dec. 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022, arrived on March 16, 2023: \$20,000;
- ***The Fidelity Charitable Fund*** Jan. 17, 2023: (Ariel Phillips and Gwyndaf Jones): \$5,000;
- ***The Lesser Foundation*** Nov. 22, 2022: \$3,000;
- ***The Keene Lions Club*** Oct. 11, 2022: \$1,000;
- ***The Highland Lake Unified Association*** Oct. 7, 2022: \$1,000;

- *The Stone Ford Society* Feb. 6, 2023: \$1,000;
- *TPL Nature in Schools Grant (assisted by Anonymous Foundation)*: March, 2023 \$12,500
- *Anonymous Foundation in Maine*: May 15, 2023 the capstone grant of \$92,000!

This is a breakdown of where the money came from:

- ✓ \$213,000+ from 290+ private donations
- ✓ \$260,000+ from 8 local foundations
- ✓ \$1,030,000 from 3 public agencies
- ✓ \$21,000+ miscellaneous

Since the successful closing on July 7, 2023, a Stewardship Committee for the LBF has been established, consisting of 3 members from the conservation commission, 3 members from road associations that abut the LBF, a member from the Board of Selectmen, and a teacher from the James Faulkner Elementary School (JFES). The committee is chaired by Robert Winterbottom (an abutter to the LBF off of Walker Rd.). The Steering Committee meets the third Wednesday of each month, 6pm at the town hall. The public is welcomed to attend.

In the fall of 2023, the Steering Committee held 3 public listening sessions to solicit ideas for stewardship from the public; the JFES elementary school held a school-wide listening session to gain input from the 60+ students who will be an important stakeholder in the LBF. The students ideas for stewardship will be integrated into a Community Management Plan that will be finalized for submission to the USFS in February, 2024, as part of the grant requirements.

At the December 13, 2023 Stewardship Committee meeting, JFES 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher Maggie Forrestall submitted five applications from JFES students who expressed interest in being the school representative to the LBF monthly stewardship meetings.

The committee did NOT want to select one student while disappointing the other 4; instead they wanted to capture and cultivate the enthusiasm. Because the Stewardship Committee was so impressed with the applications, they suggested that the 5 students form a JFES LBF Stewardship Committee, as a way of taking full advantage of the student's interest and enthusiasm. The five students accepted the challenge!

Under the careful guidance of 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher Maggie Forrestall, they will meet twice a month during lunch and talk about programs and resource needs they would like to see at the LBF. The students will decide who and how they report to the Stewardship Committee each month. All of them are welcome to attend, if they so choose.

## Little Big Forest JFES & Adult Stewardship Committee



**Front row Adult Stewardship Committee:** Milosh Bukovcan (Eva Lane representative), Jason Kovarik (Stoddard con com and planning board), Robert Winterbottom (chair), Tim Rowehl (vice chair, Walker Rd. representative), Terri LaRoche (secretary, BOS), Geoff Jones (chair Stoddard con com), Jaelynn Stetson (Stoddard con com), Maggie Forestall (JFES 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher), missing Craig Walker (abutter LBF, Walker Rd. rep),

**Back row JFES Stewardship Committee:** Peyton Allain, Grade 4; Charlotte Miller, Grade 4; Jaxon Leonard, Grade 4; Rebecca Meyer, Grade 5; Cooper Mullahy, Grade 5.

The Stewardship Committee and Conservation Commission are working on refining Goals of the LBF Ownership that includes the following:

- To protect the ecological integrity of the 40+ acre (unmanaged) forest and 4,000 feet of undeveloped shoreline;
- To allow natural disturbances (wind, hurricanes, ice storms, micro bursts) continue to be the dominating force that determines natural forest succession, not the hand of man;
- To seek protection of abutting lands to the north and east of the LBF in order to protect the ecological and recreational values of the LBF;
- To provide educational programming for school children and adults of the ecological importance of the LBF to the ecosystem of the lake, the upland forest, and adjacent conservation lands;

- To provide low-impact public access for various forms of recreational, educational, and scientific use where appropriate;
- To continue to inform Stoddard residents, town government officials, and the public at large, about the importance of a healthy, vibrant, and biologically diverse forest resource in the town and beyond.

On June 5<sup>th</sup>, local artist Richard Whitney completed a landscape portrait of the LBF to be used to commemorate the effort to protect the LBF. Copies of prints and stationary can be ordered on the LBF website (see link below). All proceeds go to the LBF stewardship fund.



On June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, the nine members of the graduating JFES 5<sup>th</sup> grade class made history on their annual 2-day canoe trip on Highland Lake. They were the first JFES class to camp overnight at the LBF; the first of what we hope will be many. The trip was organized and led by Kroka Expeditions, from Marlow. Low impact camping techniques were used, in keeping with good stewardship practices.



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## Faulkner students camp in newly protected Little Big Forest

By JAMIE BROWDER  
Sentinel Staff

STODDARD — James Faulkner Elementary School 5th-graders made history by being the first class to camp on the Little Big Forest during their annual school trip this week.

In a camping trip that lasted two days, Tuesday and Wednesday, nine Faulkner students spent the second night in the Little Big Forest. The trip was aided by Kroka Expeditions, a nonprofit wilderness expedition school based in Marlow.

"This [is] a historic visit," Geoffrey Jones, chairman of the Stoddard Conservation Commission, which is purchasing the forest, said. "The first of what we hope will be dozens, if not hundreds."

The commission finished raising funds for a \$1.5 million project to purchase the forest, plus \$100,000 extra to be put into a stewardship fund for future projects on the land last month.

The forest is 40 acres of undeveloped land with 4,000 feet of shoreline on the southern end of Highland Lake.

Jones became passionate about protecting the property's ecology, recreational value and wildlife habitat when the land went up for sale by owner Steve Wilson in April 2021.

Wilson approved the commission's plan to preserve the land in July of that year. An October 2022 appraisal determined the land was worth \$1,335,000. Another \$200,000 was estimated for project costs, bringing the total amount



JAMIE BROWDER / Sentinel Staff

James Faulkner Elementary School students, Aleah Wallace and Amelia Herne, and teacher Amanda Bridges, stretch their arms around a tree in the Little Big Forest to measure its width Wednesday. The school's 5th-graders made history this week by being the first class to camp on the Little Big Forest during their annual school trip.

to purchase and protect the property to \$1.5 million, according to a February news release from the commission.

The purchase was made possible by a \$400,000 grant from the N.H. Land and Community Heritage Investment Program, a \$600,000 grant from the U.S. Forest Service Community Forest Grant

Program, \$30,000 from the State Conservation Committee Moose Plate Grant, \$258,000 from eight foundations and \$212,632 from 287 individuals.

The official closing date on the purchase is scheduled for July 7, according to Jones.

Amanda Bridges, a 4th- and 5th-grade teacher at Faulkner Elementary, has

been leading her students on the annual trip for eight years.

There's a lot of value in taking the students on the annual trip to the Pickerel Cove and Highland Lake area because many of them don't have experience being out in the woods of Stoddard or even camping at all, she said.

The camping experience

usually includes canoeing, hiking, swimming and sleeping in tents, she said.

Although the weather was cold, Bridges was proud of how her students handled it, she said.

"For a bunch of 10- and 11-year-olds, I have not seen new campers handle weather we've been dealing with more gracefully," Bridges said. "Like chipping

in and noticing when other people need help."

Amelia Herne, 11, said she was having a lot of fun getting in touch with nature and learning new skills.

The students learned how to make food outdoors, canoe, start a fire, set up a tent and camp safely during the trip.

Canoeing was her favorite, Herne added.

"I freak out when I'm not in control of stuff, so having my friends and teachers helping with that and canoeing is really good," Amelia said.

Another student, Aleah Wallace, said her favorite part of the trip was jumping off a tall rock into Highland Lake, while the class was swimming in the lake earlier that day.

"It was really scary because I'm scared of heights, but it was fun," Wallace, 10, said.

By bringing students into the wilderness, Jones hopes students would feel connected to the outdoors and be inspired to protect the land around them.

Jones added that he'd like to see Faulkner Elementary and the town be a template for other communities and schools in New Hampshire to start protecting local wilderness.

"Once [students] become connected and get involved, these kids become stakeholders and they are invested in it," Jones said. "When you connect [with] a place, you're going to take care of it."

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**On August 19, 2023,** a celebration of the town's ownership and fundraising effort was held at Lake Falls Lodge, hosted by Don and Joyce Healy. Close to 100 friends, town officials, and representatives from supporting agencies attended.



***Left to right: Craig Walker, an abutter who brought the sale of 40 acres to our attention; Lakefalls host Don Healy; dear LBF friends Sid Craven & Rhumdoul Rom; USFS Conservation Program Manager, Neal Bungard.***

Two areas of encroachment were discovered during the boundary survey of 2022 that involved two abutting landowners. One encroachment was 0.15 acres; the other was 0.44 acres. Both were appraised separately from the conservation land, so it did not impede that transaction.

Agreements were reached over the summer and fall of 2023 and payments for the land were made to the town. The funds received for the appraised value of the two encroachments totaled \$18,500. All of the proceeds for the two encroachments will be placed in the LBF stewardship fund.

The Planning Board is scheduled to hold a public hearing and approval at their February 6, 2024 monthly meeting.

The conservation commission picked up two new members in 2023, welcome aboard Jaelynn Stetson and Aaron Bryer.

**LBF Plans for 2024:**

The Stewardship Committee and Conservation Commission have agreed to construct a 10+/- car parking lot off of the Shedd Hill access entrance, where a kiosk, porta potty, and connecting trail will be located. The schedule for construction is in the spring/early summer of 2024.

As we enter the 2024 year, the stewardship fund has a robust \$131,752.29 in the bank, with another \$20,000 scheduled to be received from the Bailey Foundation in December of 2024. The \$18,500 payment for the encroachments is NOT included in these totals (the town will transfer once the encroachments and exclusions have been approved by the town planning board).

It is important to note that not one cent of taxpayer money was used in the protection of the Little Big Forest: a promise made and kept!

To keep the stewardship fund flush, fundraising efforts will be on-going. We encourage all friends of the LBF who are inspired by our work to continue to make donations to the stewardship fund as they are so inclined.

Visit our website <https://thelittlebigforest.com/>

Lastly: we want to thank the BOS, the Davis Library, Stoddard Historical Society, the Highland Lake and Island Pond Associations for their early endorsements and the 290+ residents of Stoddard, both year round and seasonal for their generosity in helping to protect the Little Big Forest.

Respectfully submitted,



Geoffrey Jones, chair  
Jason Kovarik

Jaelynn Stetson  
Robert Fee  
Aaron Bryer