

Follow the Forest Needs Your Help to Re-Connect Critical Wildlife Corridors from Long Island Sound to Canada

By Paul Mailhot-Singer



[The Follow the Forest Initiative](#), coordinated by the [Housatonic Valley Association](#) (HVA), has a goal of protecting and connecting forests, within a critical wildlife corridor, from the Hudson Valley of NY, through Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Vermont, to Canada's boreal forest.

Using aerial imagery and GIS modelling, Follow the Forest has mapped large blocks of interior core forest--patches of woods that are larger than 250 acres and are not perforated by houses, roads or other disturbances--within this climate resilient corridor.

HVA works with conservation partners, such as local land trusts, to protect these large forests and identify wildlife linkages between them. **Linkages are the best available areas for wildlife to move from one forest block to the next.** Given the complexity of predicting where wildlife is moving,

HVA is enlisting the help of community members, such as local students and land trust volunteers, to ground-truth these wildlife linkages, particularly areas where animals need to cross roads. This community science project, designed to be easy-to-use and broadly accessible, asks volunteers to identify pinch-points where wildlife movement may be funneled or restricted by fences and other fine-scale features not picked up through HVA's computer modeling.

In sections of the Follow the Forest corridor – especially in and around cities, towns, suburbs, and exurbs – wildlife linkages become more tenuous. Our infrastructure often poses barriers to movement, and small-scale restoration efforts beginning in our backyards may be the answer for improving habitat connectivity. By incorporating native plantings in your yard, you can help stitch together and rejuvenate habitat pathways to support pollinators but also dwindling bird populations and larger mammals that also rely on large forests to survive.



Follow the Forest asks volunteers to think beyond their property and town boundaries as well. Next time you take a walk around the neighborhood or look out your window, consider how wildlife is moving throughout your landscape. The wildlife you see on a fairly regular basis, such as deer or bear, come to mind first. Black bears, increasingly common in suburbs, exhibit stress responses to roads. Mama bears with cubs have been shown to avoid certain roads entirely or wait for quieter times, such as nighttime, to cross busy roads. This makes it more difficult for bears to get where they need to go. Other species such as the Jefferson salamander, painted turtle, and northern flying squirrel do not come to mind as readily. Each of these species requires large blocks of forest for part of their life cycle and also needs to cross roads to reach a diversity of habitats. How are each of these

species moving around your neighborhood? What are the barriers, and where are they located? Where are these barriers in relation to ecologically significant habitats? How might we combat these challenges? These are some of the questions we ask Follow the Forest volunteers to explore as they complete wildlife linkage assessments of their neighborhoods.

“It may not be apparent, given the project’s large-landscape scale, how acutely its success depends on hyper-local, coordinated efforts by many advocates working together within their own towns and neighborhoods,” says Connie Manes, the Kent Land Trust’s executive director who has been working diligently to promote Pollinator Pathway and Follow the Forest in Kent, CT.

These initiatives are a testament to the fact that everything moves and is interconnected. Follow the Forest and Pollinator Pathway's success hinges on small, collective actions that begin in our flower boxes and curb strips to form the building blocks of a connected and resilient landscape for pollinators and wildlife alike.

You can help us make these visions a reality. [Learn more](#) about Follow the Forest, and contact us if you are interested in hosting a workshop in your neighborhood to learn what it takes to assess wildlife linkages near you.

Take a look at Follow the Forest's [interactive map](#).

Photos courtesy of Karalyn Lamb