

GUILFORD CONSERVATION COMMISSION ANNUAL REPORT 2020
for Town Report 2021

In a year like no other, the Guilford Conservation Commission (GCC) carried out our prescribed responsibilities while responding to the coronavirus pandemic by supporting our community in new ways. Members of the commission “hit the road” for our Ash Tree Inventory and continued to support naturalist Patti Smith, who is completing the Natural Resource Inventory mandated in our 2015 Town Plan. In addition, we regularly communicated with Guilford citizens about how to leverage our natural resources in order to stay sane and healthy during stay-at-home orders designed to limit the spread of Covid-19.

When the Town Office closed in March, the Conservation Commission quickly pivoted to online meetings, learning to negotiate Zoom and the revised Open Meeting Laws, so we could continue meeting monthly. In June we scheduled a socially distanced, masked outdoor meeting with volunteers, to refresh our protocols for continuing our Ash Tree Inventory of town roads and properties. We added mandated safety protocols to our work sessions maintaining the Andrew Weeks Forest.

Most importantly, we inaugurated a series of Cabin Fever Notes posted to Front Porch Forum, with suggestions for how Guilfordites can take advantage of our fields, streams, and forests to safely get outside while observing nature and contributing as citizen scientists to Vermont resources such as the Vernal Pool Atlas and iNaturalist’s “Wild about Guilford” group created by Patti Smith. Our exemplary efforts were recognized by the Association of Vermont Conservation Commissions (AVCC), who invited us to be on a panel for their Virtual Summit in October, highlighting how conservation commissions were adapting to the pandemic.

The Emerald Ash Borer has NOT yet been identified in Guilford, but is likely to infest our ash trees in the next 5 to 10 years, with a predicted mortality rate of over 90%. The GCC continued helping the Road Crew identify potentially hazardous trees along our town right-of-ways and properties, so that the trees can be removed before becoming dangerously brittle and while the wood is still usable. Commissioners plus volunteers completed our survey of 81 miles of town road, recording each ash tree’s location and condition. We observed that many of our ash trees are already in poor condition, even before arrival of the Ash Borer, but also found some beautiful old ash trees in good condition along our roads.

We participated in Emerald Ash Borer Awareness week in September by posting identifying signs on prominent ash trees around town, and sending daily informational bulletins to Front Porch Forum.

We assisted the Selectboard in applying for an ash tree management grant from the Vermont Department of Urban and Community Forests. Unfortunately, we did not get the grant, but we identified potential ways to utilize volunteers to make sure the wood from cut trees gets used, either by the adjacent landowners or other citizens in need of supplemental firewood.

We continued to support the field work of naturalist Patti Smith, who is conducting on-the-ground surveys of Guilford's important natural species and communities. Patti is in the final stage of working from west to east, starting from the Green River watershed, to provide a baseline inventory or snapshot of Guilford's current natural resources, in order to plan for future conservation of our most treasured assets. We have identified a few more parcels with potentially significant habitats. If a member of GCC calls to ask for permission to survey your land, we hope you'll say YES. It has been an enlightening experience for many residents to learn about the plants and wildlife on their property.

The inventory results will inform GCC's work helping the Planning Commission revise the Natural Resources sections of the 2020 Town Plan, which was put on hold when the pandemic hit. It will also underpin new requirements mandated by Act 171 for identifying and protecting forest blocks and habitat connectors while supporting the local forest products industry.

We continue to deal with invasive plants. We help the Road Crew monitor and remove potentially hazardous invasive roadside plants such as cow parsnip. We led a training session with the Recreation Commission on the Natural Playscape in Guilford Center and helped them remove several invasive plants from the property.

Other important work of GCC included maintenance of the Carriage Trail in the Andrew Weeks Forest. We know that the trail is visited frequently and much appreciated for its natural and historic values. This year we printed the 3rd edition of our trail guide, taking note that 500 guides in the first edition and 400 in the second had been picked up trail visitors in the previous four years.

Importantly, our members actively participate in regionwide conservation activities with the Green River Watershed Alliance, Windham Connectivity Collaborative, Vermont Woodlands Association, Windham Regional Commission, and the joint regional meetings of conservation-focused groups, all of which continued working during the pandemic.

We communicate with Guilford community members via Front Porch Forum, the Guilford Gazette, and Town Meeting displays of maps and information. We established a Conservation Commission page on the town website to house information relevant to our mission of educating the public about our natural resources.

Current members of the Guilford Conservation Commission are Linda Hecker, Susan Bonthron, Bill Jewell, Linda Lembke, Steve Soszynski, Karen Murphy, Bevan Quinn, Marli Rabinowitz, Anne Montgomery, with Michael Becker representing the Selectboard and David Eastman contributing as a highly valued volunteer.

The Conservation Commission holds regular meetings at 5:30pm on the third Thursday of each month in the Town Office or virtually via Zoom. If you'd like to participate in our walks, activities or join a working committee, contact chair Linda Hecker at lrhecker47@gmail.com

The Guilford Conservation Commission (GCC) was formed in 2000. Our mission is to identify, inventory, foster education about, and help protect Guilford's natural, scenic, recreational, historic, educational, cultural, architectural, agricultural, and archaeological resources for the public good. The commission "shall help residents and town officials recognize the value of these resources and administer them for the benefit of future generations."

Submitted by Linda Hecker, GCC chair