

# Thayer Brook Preserve

Maine Outdoor Heritage Fund – Final Report

May 2, 2023

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## **Project Success in Meeting Stated Objectives**

*Defined objectives in our February 2022 application are below, with April 2023 comments stating our successes in bolded blue.*

- To bring conservation funding and conservation deed covenants to RRCT's March 2022 pre-acquisition of the 147-acre Thayer Brook Preserve parcel by means of a January 2023 conservation closing. **Within the next several months, RRCT will successfully acquire state and federal funds through Land for Maine's Future (LMF) and the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA). The reason for delay (not closing in January 2023) is due to the federal budget and dispersal of NAWCA funds and LMF capacity with numerous closings. Because of MOHF funding, all due diligence was completed to the highest level of state and federal standard and all issues identified in due diligence were resolved.**
- To plan and manage the parcel for both ecological and recreational success. We note and appreciate existing an expected guidance from MDIFW on heron rookery management. We expect high levels of public recreational interest in the parcel. **The project is experiencing both ecological and recreational success. In June 2022, RRCT completed a comprehensive interim management plan that guides the decision-making process of the Preserve from 2022-2024. In 2024, RRCT will complete a 10-15 year management plan. RRCT has leveraged state biologist expertise regarding the critical heron colony. While protecting the herons, which arrived from their annual migration again a month ago, RRCT has also managed to improve the recreational experience of the Preserve. Aging bridges have been and are being replaced, a new trail was created to connect to Libby Hill Forest and the existing trails have been improved, RRCT has added signage and blazing throughout the trail network, and RRCT is nearing the completion of its parking lot on Ramsdell Road which will significantly affect the accessibility of the Preserve. Three volunteers serve as preserve stewards, monitoring the recreational use of the Preserve and gathering input for RRCT staff. All of this work aside, simply adding nearly 150 acres to 150 acres of conservation-recreation land is an ecological success as this block of undeveloped land is the 5<sup>th</sup> largest in Greater Portland at around 2,500 total acres.**
- To maintain and expand existing educational partnerships between the Gray-New Gloucester school system and the Fiddlehead School and MDIFW and RRCT. **RRCT has a very strong relationship with Fiddlehead School. RRCT spent significant staff time in 2022 helping 8<sup>th</sup> graders complete their capstone projects at the Intervale Preserve in New Gloucester. Some of their projects included a star gazing platform, a guided meditation walk, and a native plant food garden. RRCT has met with the superintendent of the Gray-New Gloucester school system and in the near future RRCT may more actively consider how to support their students. The students already use Libby Hill Forest and parts of Thayer Brook Preserve for a variety of classes (e.g. P.E., English, Science) and after several school programs.**
- To be a catalyst for additional conservation in Gray especially this town-identified "Critical Rural Area" following the town's adoption of a comprehensive plan and open space plan. A portion of the "bridge" funds allowing the March 2022 pre-acquisition will be "rolled" and formally dedicated toward the hoped-for conservation of abutting parcels. With no funding from sources like MOHF,

less funds will be available to “roll.” **With support from MOHF and other funders, RRCT has “rolled” \$111,273 in funds. These funds will be used for future conservation of abutting parcels and other key lands in Gray. Some of the funds may also be used for stewardship projects at Thayer Brook Preserve. In the past year since RRCT’s first closing, RRCT staff has interacted and built relationships with key landowners near Thayer Brook Preserve and throughout Gray. These rolled funds will be crucial for the next land conservation project(s) in Gray, a town that is still heavily underserved from a conservation and open space perspective, despite a growing population with development pressure.**

- To coordinate with a mutually support trail managers at Gray’s Libby Hill Forest Trails (including Gray Community Endowment, Town of Gray, and school system per signed Memorandum of Agreement); to coordinate with a mutually support snowmobile club and ATV trail managers. **RRCT has built a strong relationship with the Town of Gray, Gray Community Endowment, and local clubs. The ATV and snowmobile clubs have worked alongside RRCT volunteers to maintain and improve trails, including the replacement of aging bridges necessary to cross small streams. RRCT’s Preserve and Libby Hill Forest have collaborated to possess an integrated trail network and RRCT has supported Libby Hill Forest in updating the maps of their trails.**

## **How MOHF Monies Were Spent**

Our budget is attached in Appendix A. Because Maine Outdoor Heritage Fund dollars were used to conduct expensive and time consuming due diligence required by state and federal partners (LMF, NAWCA), over \$130,000 was leveraged by this Maine Outdoor Heritage Fund grant.

## **Communication Efforts**

The acquisition of Thayer Brook Preserve has been a major communication device to build awareness of a new preserve in Gray as well as serving as an inspiration for further Gray land conservation. Maine Outdoor Heritage Fund has been mentioned by name on [RRCT’s website](#) and when the full size kiosk is installed at our trailhead, we happily wish to include a Maine Outdoor Heritage Fund logo on the kiosk. MOHF has also been mentioned by social media (Instagram, Facebook) on April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023. We also have mentioned Maine Outdoor Heritage Fund verbally, such as at a January 2023 Gray public meeting discussing land conservation. Thayer Brook Preserve has received other press, such as in the [Northern Forecaster](#).

When the parking lot is constructed, we also plan on announcing its opening via our newsletter of 2,000+ people and call attention to MOHF with the language MOHF provides under the “required communications” provision.

## **Photographs & Illustrations**

Photographs are attached in Appendix B.

## **Continued Work with Partners & Funders**

RRCT will continue to work with partners past the date of this report. The Town of Gray supported the construction of the parking lot which will be fully built by the end of May 2023. RRCT will continue to work with the snowmobile and ATV clubs to improve the multi-use trail that RRCT inherited when we purchased the property. We also will continue to consult with the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife to ensure that the wetland supporting the Great Blue Herons is properly managed. Libby Hill Forest continues to be an integral partner as our trail networks connect to one another. As the earlier, necessary early tasks of establishing a Preserve are completed, we will turn our attention to Fiddlehead and the Gray-New Gloucester schools to learn how our land trust can support getting more kids outside and learning about their natural environment.

## **MOHF Feedback**

Our experience working with Maine Outdoor Heritage Fund has been a very positive experience, as it has been with past RRCT/MOHF projects. The application requirements were clear and concise and MOHF staff was always responsive. RRCT did experience some confusion about when a final report was due and if annual progress reports are necessary. Further examination of the reporting guidelines may be valuable, or the deadlines may be an issue shared by RRCT alone.

## **Write-up for MOHF Media**

The Town of Gray is not well-served from most conservation perspectives, with rapid commercial and residential growth and conservation acreage far below state, county, and local percentages. In 2022, Royal River Conservation Trust took an informed risk by meeting a landowner-imposed deadline and purchased 147 acres of land abutting the beloved Libby Hill Forest. Maine Outdoor Heritage Fund provided the ability for RRCT to conduct necessary due diligence required for state and federal funds. With the requirements completed, RRCT was able to pay itself back for early risk-taking on behalf of recreationalists and the local ecology.

These 147 acres, now named Thayer Brook Preserve, provide alternative and connected recreation opportunities to Libby Hill Forest, while protecting one of the best sites for a species of greatest conservation need in Maine. In May 2023, drop your car off at the newly built parking lot and explore a prized recreation and ecological destination.

*\*\*Please do not mention Great Blue Herons in any press release for this project. Adapt this blurb as you see fit. Parking lot should be finished after the first week in May (May 6<sup>th</sup>)\*\**



**Appendix B**



*Diversified Communications company work day, July 2023*



*Ribbon cutting ceremony, July 2022*



*An old trailer and other materials were hauled out and removed in summer 2022, thanks to funding from MOHF*





*Large wetland created by beavers, providing important habitat for Great Blue Herons and other species of conservation need*



*Parking lot construction (not yet complete), April 2023*



*New bridge replacing an aging and deteriorated bridge, April 2023*