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Above: Mount Molly is a prominent, scenic peak overlooking Merrymeeting Lake in New Durham.

CREDIT: © JERRY MONKMAN, ECOPHOTOGRAPHY, LLC

Keeping Merrymeeting Lake Clean

New Effort to Protect Mount Molly & Expand Birch Ridge Community Forest

Clean water is born in the forests of New Hampshire. Leaves and needles slow the erosive power of rain. Roots hold soil fast. Woody debris and leaf litter hold back the fallen water, helping it slowly soak the ground. There it seeps, trickles, and disappears, replenishing our groundwater, wetlands, streams, and lakes.

It's no surprise that the more forested and intact a watershed remains, the cleaner the streams, rivers, ponds, and lakes. But what may be a surprise is one of the largest lakes in southeastern New Hampshire – Merrymeeting Lake in New Durham – is one of New Hampshire's cleanest waterbodies.

A new effort, *Keep Merrymeeting Clean*, seeks to help do just that – protect the watershed that keeps the lake pristine – by permanently conserving an additional 1,100 acres through the protection of Mount Molly and the expansion of the Birch Ridge Community Forest, which was originally protected in 2019 after a decade of effort.

As Russ Weldon, Board member of the Merrymeeting Lake Association and owner of the Merrymeeting Marina, explains, “we can't control when opportunities present themselves and this is an amazing chance to build on our past success to protect Merrymeeting by protecting another 10% of the watershed.”

For decades, Merrymeeting's ring of ridges escaped development from subdivisions and second homes. This expanse of forest was overlooked for bigger lakes to the north and west or spared by economic downturns. But this all seemed to be an acute risk in 2008 when 2,000 acres overlooking Birch Ridge were nearly developed. A recession once again spared the land but as 2018 approached, it appeared again slated for development. Would this be the time that a once dark ridge would be marred by the glare of glowing home lighting and headlights?

Led by Weldon and other members of the Merrymeeting Lake Association (MMLA), residents rallied to secure the future of the forest. With an option and a little over a year to raise \$3 million, the MMLA partnered with SELT and Moose Mountains Regional Greenways to successfully complete what had long been sought: the protection of Birch Ridge.

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Life Interrupted: How COVID-19 is shaping SELT and Our Communities

A Note from Executive Director Brian Hart

Since mid-March, lives have been put on pause by the rapid onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Daycares and schools shuttered. Parents thrust into the role of being teachers. Jobs shifted to home or lost. Neighbors or family members sick. Fear and anxiety are constant companions, changing who we see, how we interact, where we go, what we do. The degree of impact and response varies for each of us. But through this all, we persist; altered, interrupted, changed, shaped in ways no one anticipated.

For SELT, we remain hopeful for what land means today and will mean in the future for our communities. We want you to know about our immediate response and future implications resulting from this pandemic.

- **Our work continues, uninterrupted.** Since mid-March, SELT staff have been working remotely from their homes, focused on ensuring their personal and family health. With amazing technology, this transition has been quite smooth. When and how we return to our offices in downtown Exeter remains to be determined. Check our website for updates, or better yet, sign up for our e-news updates!
- **Virtual events are here to stay:** Best practices for limiting the spread of the coronavirus don't allow SELT's traditional field trips and events. I'm proud of our staff who, faced with this reality, embraced new ways to share our work. It's clear that these types of events are here to stay. If you have not already, check out Facebook, Instagram, and our website for live streamed, recorded, and virtual events.
- **Relevance to People:** One thing is clear – our region loves open space. Through the course of this pandemic, visitation to SELT's major reservations has never been higher. This gives me hope for our work during a recession – people of all ages are getting outside and enjoying nature. The challenge is managing the impact on the land and neighbors.



Like a lot of people, getting outside has been a respite for Executive Director Brian Hart and his family. CREDIT: SELT

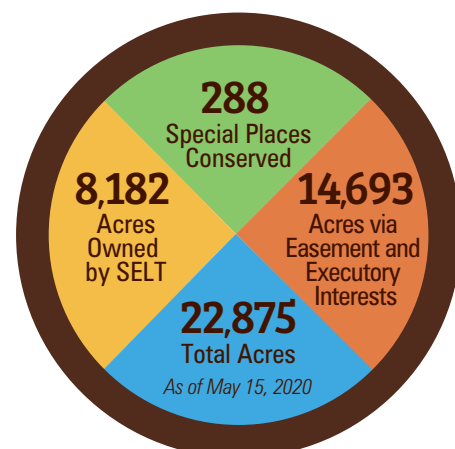
- **Local food, now more than ever:** COVID-19 has heightened awareness of the fragility of our food supply chain. The result has been increased interest in local meat, eggs, and veggies, and near instant innovation by the farm community to meet demand. Deliveries of direct-from-the-farm produce and meats are now a weekly occurrence in many towns. SELT is hopeful this trend bolsters the support for our farmland conservation, access, and affordability work.

Whether this is a pause or a new normal, the pandemic has impacted you and us all, and I do hope you and your family are healthy and safe. Thank you for your support.

Piscassic Greenway Grows Again

The 2006 creation of the Piscassic Greenway in **Newfields** and **Newmarket** was not the end, but the beginning, and this May SELT completed the third addition to the Greenway puzzle with a 16-acre purchase. This land extends the Greenway's frontage along a beaver pond and stream that are a tributary to the Piscassic River, further protecting this important habitat and allowing nature to continue to filter water that eventually enters the Great Bay estuary. Karen Tucker sold the land to SELT in loving memory of her deceased father, Donald Tucker, who made it clear for her to balance conservation and development of his real estate interests he left to her. The success of this project was due to the generous support of the Town of Newmarket, the Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership, the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Wetlands Reserve Easement Program, and Appledore Real Estate, which represented Karen Tucker.

Land Conservation by the numbers



Turtles and Trails: The Proposed Ann Tibbitts Schulz Turtle Brook Preserve

Driven by a desire to protect Barrington's natural resources, Jim and Ann Schulz found themselves at the forefront of the town's conservation movement during the 1970's and 1980's. They spearheaded the early efforts of the Barrington Conservation Commission and were among the first easement donors in the town, conserving the majority of their 50-acre farm on Scruton Pond Road. Since Jim and Ann had such a unique appreciation for the land, in 1991 when the opportunity arose to purchase 44.6 acres on Brewster Road that was at-risk for development – even though it was in the process of being clear-cut – they took it.

Under Jim and Ann's careful stewardship, the land now shows little signs of the past over-harvesting and is flourishing as a diverse, well-managed forest. Its granite ledges make an obvious statement, but upon closer inspection, you'll find a world of activity: beavers busy tending to their dams, the courting and nesting of great blue herons in a well-established rookery, and different species of turtles sneaking out of the water to sunbathe. The land is almost like an island, surrounded on three sides by wetlands and streams that are tributaries to the Isinglass River – one of the cleanest tributaries to Great Bay.

With dreams of making the property accessible to the public, while maintaining its productive wildlife habitat, Jim and Ann became very involved with the creation of the Barrington Trail.



A glimpse of the heron rookery on the proposed Ann Tibbitts Schulz Turtle Brook Preserve. PHOTO BY JOHN WALLACE.



Jim Schulz with his daughter, Jean Bresciani and his grandson, Luca. PHOTO BY JOHN WALLACE.

This popular trail extends from the SELT-held Barr Conservation Easement near Greenhill Road all the way to the Town of Barrington's athletic fields located on Smoke Street. Over a half mile of the 3.6-mile trail runs through the Schulz property and allows the public to enjoy the natural wonders and history of the area through a variety of passive recreational opportunities.

Following Ann's passing in 2017, Jim and their children wished to memorialize her legacy by permanently protecting this land and naming it the "Ann Tibbitts Schulz Turtle Brook Preserve", which SELT is honored to have been chosen to steward in perpetuity. The Schulz family will be making a generous donation of the land to SELT, which will be finalized after an additional \$10,000 is raised and a conservation easement to the Natural Resources Conservation Service is finalized. Once conserved, this property will fill a hole in a continuous block of almost 400 acres of protected or public land, leaving a Schulz family legacy for future generations to enjoy.

You can help create the Ann Tibbitts Schulz Turtle Brook Preserve with your gift today at seltnh.org/donate.

Keeping Merrymeeting Lake Clean continued from page 1

Galvanized by the strong community response to save Birch Ridge, *Keep Merrymeeting Clean* is a two-pronged effort that builds on that success. *Keep Merrymeeting Clean* seeks to conserve a prominent scenic landmark and hiking overlook, Mount Molly on the northwest side of the lake, and to add 643 acres to the Birch Ridge Community Forest.

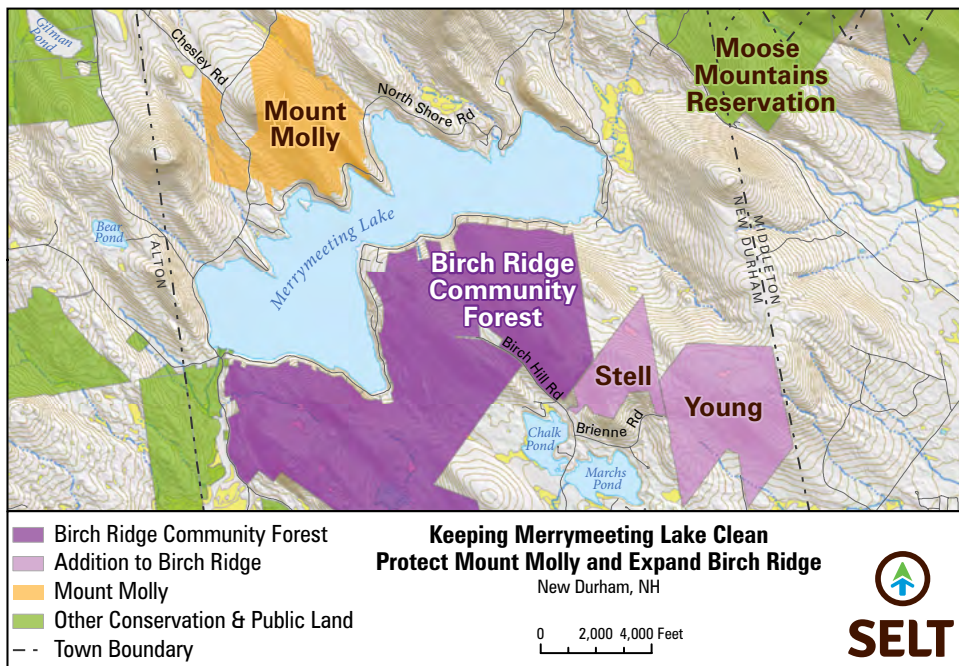
Protecting Mount Molly

Inspired by their love of the lake and their joy in seeing others enjoy Mount Molly, the Collins Family has made a remarkable pledge: they will gift to SELT 500 acres that includes Devil's Den and the slopes and peak of Mount Molly to ensure it will be protected for future generations and open to the general public for hiking and similar activities. The Collins Family acquired this land over the course of a decade and has always let others enjoy it. This land abuts North Shore Road and Chesley Road and is visible from much of the lake itself, as well as from the Birch Ridge Community Forest.

"This is an incredibly generous offer," explains Duane Hyde, Land Conservation Director. "Mount Molly is a special place of solitude and beauty, and SELT is honored that the Collins Family is entrusting its future stewardship with us." While the Collins Family is receiving no compensation for their generous land gift, SELT still has substantial costs for accepting such a gift. These include transaction costs like a boundary survey and title work, capital improvements for kiosks and a parking area, and ensuring SELT has the ability to manage the sustainable use of what is and will be a favorite hiking spot.

Expanding Birch Ridge

A second part of *Keep Merrymeeting Clean* is the purchase of two tracts – the Stell and Young tracts – that directly abut the already conserved Birch Ridge. These lands, located off Birch Hill Road and Brienne Road, total approximately 643 acres and are being acquired at their appraised, fair market value from their respective landowners.



This land is dominated by pine and oak with pockets of hemlocks and small areas of wetlands consisting of a red maple swamp and red maple-highbush blueberry swamp. For wildlife enthusiasts, the property has observed populations of moose, black bear, bobcat, snowshoe hare, and grouse, along with more common species like deer, fox, and coyote; it's no wonder that 97% of the property is a priority for conservation under the state's *Wildlife Action Plan*. The properties include nearly 13 miles of woods roads and snowmobile trails, including a beautiful vista that looks out toward the Blue Hills mountain range. The trail system on the two tracts will greatly expand the 10 miles of existing and planned trails on the Birch Ridge Community Forest.

This initiative received great news in late April, with the announcement of a \$485,000 grant to SELT from the US Forest Service's Community Forest and Open Space Program for the expansion of Birch Ridge. The project ranked #3 nationally, competing against 22 other projects for the \$4 million available.

SELT's application received letters of support from a broad swath of the community, including the Powder Mill Snowmobile Club, the Lion's Camp Pride, the Merrymeeting Lake Association, several local businesses, and the New Durham Board of Selectmen.

Together, protecting Mount Molly and expanding Birch Ridge Community Forest are part of a larger strategic vision to safeguard the long-term water quality of Merrymeeting Lake. The 2019 study *Merrymeeting River and Lake Watershed Management Plan* confirmed the value and benefit of land conservation. The study found the Lake and River are at serious risk

for sustained water quality degradation as a result of new development in the watershed. Amongst a series of recommendations, the Plan recommends that towns collaborate with local partners, like SELT and Moose Mountains Regional Greenways, on conservation initiatives within the watershed. The good news is that *Keep Merrymeeting Clean* increases the conserved portion of the watershed to 29%. Prior to the establishment of the Birch Ridge Community Forest, only 4% was conserved!

The total value of this initiative – including the cost to acquire, conserve, and steward these three remarkable properties – is just over \$2,200,000. Fortunately, with the Collins Family's generous pledge of land (estimated value at \$750,000) and the USFS grant of \$485,000, more than 50% has been secured. SELT and its community partners have roughly \$1 million to be raised by April 2021.

"The interests that we all share in protecting Merrymeeting Lake for future generations is a driving force that cannot be deterred by a momentary pandemic," comments Weldon. "I trust that the generosity and values behind us will lead to the protection of three more properties. I feel confident that we will do this together."

How You Can Help

Learn More at seltnh.org

Check out Birch Ridge at an upcoming field trip or virtual tour: see page 6

Contribute: Make a special gift to protect Mount Molly and expand Birch Ridge

Plans, Trails, and More Coming for Birch Ridge Community Forest

A property as big as Birch Ridge takes time to plan for and then to implement. Since the acquisition of Birch Ridge Community Forest (BRCF), SELT has worked closely with the volunteer Community Forest Steering Committee to adopt a management plan. The plan will guide public access for recreation, habitat protection for wildlife, preservation of water quality, a well-managed forest, and climate change resilience.




“We know the community is anxious to explore and enjoy Birch Ridge and SELT and the Committee are working diligently to finalize the management plan and implement access improvements,” comments Charlie Bridges, New Durham resident and chair of the BRCF Steering Committee. With the plan nearly done and the field season now in full swing, SELT is preparing procedures that will allow volunteer-driven workdays to proceed while protecting the health of all involved, subject

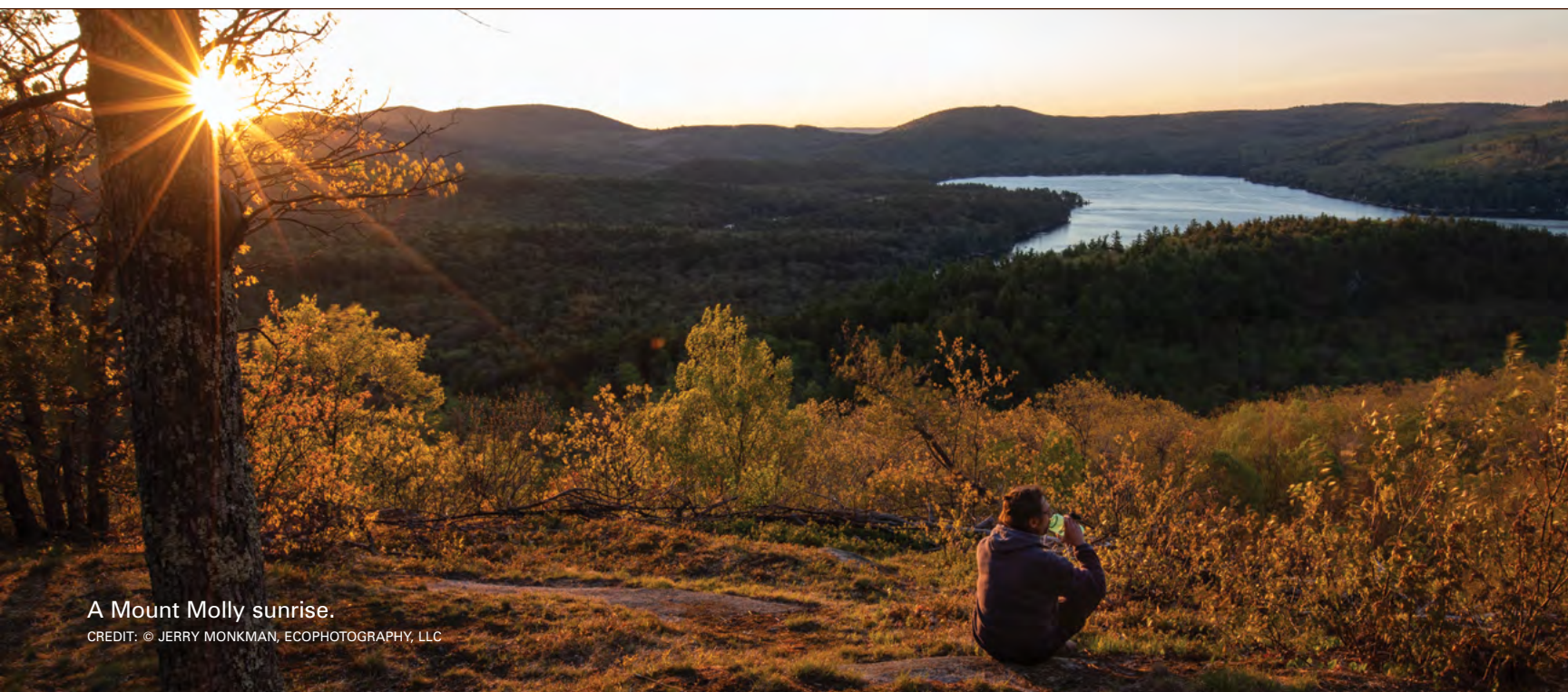
to such activities being allowed under Governor Sununu’s emergency order.

To guide the future of the forest, the Steering Committee first adopted a vision statement and set of goals. From there, the Committee worked with consulting forester Jon Martin of Martin Forestry, trails consultant Lew Shelly of SnowHawk LLC, and two wildlife biologists from the Committee, Charlie Bridges and Lee Alexander, to develop a unified management plan for the BRCF. After nearly a year of discussions and work, the Committee adopted the proposed final plan at its May 20th meeting that will be presented this summer to the public for feedback. The full draft management plan can be viewed at seltnh.org/gallery/birchridge/.

A huge thank you to the volunteer members of the Steering Committee for their contributions of time, energy, and ideas!

Highlights of 2020–2022 Work Plan at Birch Ridge Community Forest

Focus Areas	2020	2021	2022
Water Quality 	Complete further repair of Corridor 22 and Lake Trail		Monitor and repair as needed
	Restore three stream crossings		
Public Access & Trails 	Install parking/kiosks on Merrymeeting Rd. & Birch Hill Rd.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build Birch Ridge Loop • Locate community access trail from South Shore Rd. 	Install final trail maps, kiosks, and guides
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Install trails for Mount Eleanor and Rattlesnake Mountain • Design universally accessible trail 	Update maps and trail guide	Engage community on potential trails for horseback riding
Wildlife Habitat 	Secure funding and as possible, implement early successional habitat and timber stand improvement		
			Create fire management plan for blueberry barrens



A Mount Molly sunrise.
 CREDIT: © JERRY MONKMAN, ECOPHOTOGRAPHY, LLC

Get Outside

While SELT hopes to move our outreach events off the internet and back onto the trails where they belong, the timing for such a transition is unknown! Either way, we will continue to provide programming that connects you, our SELTies, to this wonderful and special region we call home. Each summer event listed has a fun and interactive back up plan – just in case! Our top priority will always be to keep you, our supporters, safe and healthy... even if we miss seeing your faces!

Sign up at seltnh.org/events-page. Suggested donation is \$5/person or \$10/family. Please register early – our events fill up quickly. Registration closes at noon the day before the event.

Plan B? How Virtual and Self-Guided Tours Work

For most upcoming events, SELT has a “Plan B” should the pandemic prevent an in-person event. Registrants will be notified via email on the event status and details on whether it will be in-person, virtual (via Zoom), or Self-Guided.



Wildflower Walk

Burley Farms, Epping
June 19 • 1–4 PM or Virtual Tour

Learn to identify wildflowers of the woods, wetlands, and fields with Super SELTie, Phil Auger, and Native Plant Trust Volunteer, Celia Abrams.



Virtual Conservation Celebration

June 25 • 5–6 PM •

In the comfort of your home

Join SELT for a Virtual Annual Meeting. Enjoy locally sourced food and brews in the comfort of home and celebrate our successes together from afar!

Birch Ridge Community Forest Hike

Birch Ridge Community Forest, New Durham • July 18 • 10 AM–Noon or Virtual Tour

Check out the quarry, Blueberry Hill, Aspinwall Settlement and Graveyard, and the geological ridge with Land Manager, T. Parker Schuerman.



Kinney Hill & Heron Pond Farm Tour

Heron Pond Farm Stand, South Hampton
July 25 • 9–11 AM or Virtual Tour

Head to Kinney Hill & Heron Pond Farm and learn about farming techniques like cover cropping, intercropping, forage, and irrigation.



Forest Bathing

Tucker & French Family Forest, Kingston
August 1 • Noon–3 PM or Self-Guided Tour

Join Dennis Garnham, certified Forest Therapy Guide, for a Forest Bathing Therapy session on conserved SELT Land—it’s more than a walk in the woods!



Family Naturalist Series: Ferns!

Mast Road Natural Area, Epping
August 20 • 8:30 AM–Noon or Zoom Talk & Self-Guided Tour

Do you want to enhance your family’s natural adventures? Join SELT’s Family Naturalist Series! First, we’ll learn about fern ID, then take our skills out to the field!



2 Loop Hike and Yoga

Piscassic Greenway, Newfields
September 12 • 8 AM–Noon or Virtual Tour

Hike the Otis Trail and Mraz Loop at the Piscassic Greenway then head to Vernon Family Farm for a yoga class!



EASY MODERATE DIFFICULT

PHOTO CREDITS: SELT, SPNHF, © JERRY MONKMAN, ECOPHOTOGRAPHY, LLC

Generous support from the Center for Assessment makes these field trips possible. Learn more about our Get Outside sponsor at nceia.org.



In All Ways, Engaged on the Land

Karen and Brent Merriam are a collective powerhouse when it comes to volunteering with SELT. Karen has volunteered as a trail marshal at SELT's TrailFest and was on the 2020 Wild & Scenic Film Festival film selection committee. Brent is a volunteer easement steward, serves on the Land Stewardship Committee, and is on the SELT Board of Directors. Through his role as Chief Operating Officer at NEMO Equipment, Inc., Brent and the NEMO team volunteer to build bridges and clear trails.

Being outside has been a theme in their lives since childhood, with experiences that rooted their connection to nature. Karen remembers building forts and exploring the woods and marshes. Her grandparents lived beside a waterfall on Cold Brook in Freedom, NH, and she and her brother spent hours-on-end enjoying the small wonders of that world. Karen also credits her father for instilling a deep love of our natural world in her – from the giant awe of thunderstorms to the tiny miracle of ants. Similarly, Brent remembers a pond near his house where he would enjoy the simple thrill of catching frogs and turtles. When he was four and five, his family drove from Maine to South Dakota and back, camping along the way, which he believes had a lifelong influence on his appreciation for nature and open spaces.

With those childhood memories, it's no surprise that both Karen and Brent value nature. When asked if they have worries about the future of the environment, Karen said her biggest worry is the loss of connection to nature over generations as we spend more time indoors and as the biosphere is displaced by the technosphere. Brent's biggest concern is that climate change isn't being taken seriously enough, acted on quickly enough, or with enough will and determination to make a difference. Both Brent and Karen worry what that means for their daughter and future generations. Brent is encouraged by today's students who are taking leadership roles in the climate movement and using their voices to make the changes necessary for a healthy future. Karen hopes for an increase in intergenerational collaboration toward restoring the earth, bringing together the wisdom of elders with the energy of youth toward a common purpose.

But it's not all doom and gloom! Both agree that many people are getting more interested in the conservation movement. Brent believes, "more people are recognizing that the land on this earth and in our immediate communities is finite, along with clean water, clean air, and places to connect with nature." He went on to say, "we can choose to develop this land, or we can choose to conserve it for the enjoyment and enrichment of future generations. Thankfully, organizations like SELT are leading the charge for conserving and stewarding these finite lands." Karen is also grateful for SELT. "I wish more people knew how much land SELT has helped protect and now stewards, particularly agricultural land, which is a vitally important piece of the conservation puzzle," she said.

When asked what they would tell someone who is thinking about volunteering with SELT, Karen said, "it is incredibly fulfilling to be part of something larger and more enduring than yourself." Brent agreed, encouraging people to act. "Stop thinking about it and do it! SELT is a fantastic organization with an important conservation mission. There are so many ways to volunteer and the staff is welcoming and supportive. In volunteering for SELT, you can make meaningful contributions to conserving and stewarding the significant lands in our communities, and experience first-hand the results of your efforts by getting out and exploring these conserved lands."

We couldn't have said it better, Brent! Thank you, Karen and Brent. We are so lucky to have you on Team SELT!



SELT volunteers Brent and Karen Merriam with their daughter at the Mast Road Natural Area, Epping.

COURTESY PHOTO

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Questions, Comments, Concerns?

To contact SELT, please call **603-778-6088** or email **info@seltnh.org**.

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Keep Merrymeeting Lake Clean Seeks to Conserve 1,100+ Acres

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Life Interrupted: How COVID-19 is shaping SELT and Our Communities

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Your opinion is requested: Membership survey enclosed!

see insert

Conservation Sneak Peeks

Three (Cheers) for Clean Water

Working closely with the **Town of Auburn** and the Manchester Water Works, SELT is in the process of completing a 220-acre conservation easement that will help protect the water supply for New Hampshire's largest City and also ensure that critical habitat for rare and common wildlife continues to be available.

In **Madbury**, SELT is partnering with the **City of Portsmouth** on a 170-acre conservation easement with nearly a mile of frontage on the Bellamy Reservoir, building off the success of the Olson easement from 2018. And in **Lee**, an abutter to an existing SELT-owned reserve is generously donating land along the Oyster River. This will benefit the downstream drinking water supply for the **Town of Durham** and University of New Hampshire.

Local Farms, Now More than Ever

During the coronavirus pandemic, the need for a reliable local food supply has never been clearer. With a closing just around the corner for the 135-acre Scruton Dairy Farm in **Farmington**, SELT continues to work to permanently conserve farmland to ensure that a productive land base remains available for local food production. Currently SELT has another 375 acres of farmland projects under agreement spread over four farms in

Fremont, Newmarket, Epping, Brentwood and Farmington.

What makes this even more exciting is that two farms were previously fallow. While you would not always think of a land trust as matchmaker, SELT is connecting farmers looking for land with landowners wishing to sell their land, helping to bring these farms back into local food production.



Right: Jacob Scruton bottle-feeding calves at his family's farm in Farmington. © JERRY MONKMAN, ECOPHOTOGRAPHY, LLC