

Year *in* Review

Berkshire & Connecticut River
Valley Region

2020



Dear Friends and Champions of Nature,

Certainly, 2020 was a year like no other. It was full of challenges, but because of you, we had incredible successes. You made it possible to:

- Care for (and re-open in May) 14 wildlife sanctuaries across Western Massachusetts, providing a physical and mental respite from pandemic-caused shutdowns.
- Transition in-school programming to live virtual and video formats, keeping more than 1,500 young people across the region connected to nature through science and climate change lessons.
- Adapt sanctuary programs including Berkshire Nature Camp and Arcadia's Nature Preschool to provide children with safe, in-person experiences to connect to nature and peers.
- Plant 2,150 trees at Arcadia and Canoe Meadows to restore floodplain forest and create climate resilient landscapes.
- Support young climate champions through a virtual Youth Climate Summit with schools participating from across the region.
- Raise more than \$1 million for capital projects that will allow us to better serve our communities for generations to come.

In mid-March, we couldn't have imagined this list of accomplishments. But thanks to your incredibly generous contributions to our special projects and Bird-at-home-athon, renewing your memberships faithfully, and continuing to come out to volunteer, the year has been a surprising success.

Because you were there for us, we could be there for you.

Nature, with its seasonal changes and adaptations in times of crisis, teaches us resilience. In 2020, as we lived through the pandemic, political upheaval, and a racial justice reckoning, we have been inspired by the resilience of our communities. We look forward to bringing that energy into 2021 and harnessing it to expand Mass Audubon's work of protecting land, educating for the environment, and inspiring action to address the climate crisis throughout the region.

With gratitude and hope,

Becky Cushing-Gop
Mass Audubon West Director

Jonah Keane
Connecticut River Valley Director

Building for the Future

With the support of our communities, Pleasant Valley and Arcadia wildlife sanctuaries continued to build for the future, despite the challenges of COVID-19.

In the Berkshires, generous individuals and foundations contributed more than \$1 million to build an energy-efficient addition to the sanctuary's 18th-century program barn, which will include a lobby with interactive educational displays, large decks for accessible programs or sitting and relaxing in nature, and modern restrooms that are family-friendly and fully accessible. The new space, opening this spring, will allow Pleasant Valley to welcome a larger and more diverse audience.

With gifts ranging from \$25 to \$15,000, community members in the Connecticut River Valley gave the majority of the funds needed to make possible the construction of a Teaching Pavilion in the Arcadia field. The impressive 50' x 30' structure is sited among restored native plantings and rain gardens. The Pavilion is already being put to good use providing cover during rain and snow for the 2020-2021 all-outdoors Nature Preschool and homeschool programs.

These are hopeful, forward-looking projects that will allow both sanctuaries to connect more people to nature

and inspire more young people with nature and climate education, nurturing the next generation of conservation leaders.



Historic Program Barn at Pleasant Valley



Arcadia Teaching Pavilion © Phil Doyle



Adaptation to the Virtual Environment

Taking their cues from nature's adaptability, educators across the region shifted their teaching methods to meet the needs of students now learning primarily in virtual environments.

The Berkshire Environmental Literacy (BEL) program engaged 17 new teachers last spring to serve a five-year high of 1,550 K-12 students. Educators combined virtual classes with packaged lessons presented through curated videos, worksheets, and readings that students could do on their own. Lessons encouraged students to explore the wonders of water and the changing seasons in their own backyards and neighborhoods. Students were excited to get outdoors! Teachers were thrilled with how BEL was adapted to the online environment with engaging, interactive lessons.

Arcadia and Hitchcock Center for the Environment co-hosted the 4th annual Youth Climate Summit focused on youth empowerment in the face of the global climate crisis. The virtual format—designed entirely by a student leadership team—allowed for participation of

middle- and high-schoolers from across the Connecticut River Valley and Berkshires. Student teams left the Summit with self-designed Climate Action Plans (CAP) to launch recycling and composting programs as well as educational events to bring more young people into climate work. They will meet monthly to receive technical support and coaching on CAP implementation in their schools and communities.

Restoring Habitat for Climate Adaptation

Volunteers were the champions of exciting floodplain forest restoration projects at both Arcadia and Canoe Meadows this year.

At Arcadia, more than 50 volunteers turned out in the last days of October to help plant over 2,000 trees and shrubs before winter. This climate adaptation project prepares the site for the current and future impacts of a warming climate by sourcing trees native to Western Massachusetts from nurseries further south—and by planting new species, such as sweet gum, that exist in floodplain forests in the Middle Atlantic. These choices increase the likelihood that the forest will flourish in the future.

Helia Native Nursey donated the 150 trees that volunteers planted in the floodplain at Canoe Meadows in Pittsfield this fall. Species including the tulip tree, American sycamore, and swamp white oak were chosen for the project because they flourish both in New England's current climate and further south.





Great Blue Heron at Bear Hole © Gregory Kucinski

A Record Year for Land Conservation in the West

Mass Audubon's most exciting and important conservation efforts were concentrated in Western Massachusetts this year. Parcels adjacent to High Ledges, Laughing Brook, Arcadia, Pleasant Valley, Cold Brook, and West Mountain were conserved, expanding these sanctuaries and providing greater protection for wildlife.

A partnership between the city of West Springfield, the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), and Mass Audubon protected 1,500 acres of spectacular forest and recreational trails at Bear Hole in West Springfield and Holyoke. Bob Wilber, Mass Audubon's Director of Land Conservation, reflected on the importance of Bear Hole, saying, "I've been in land conservation for 37 years. This is the most important project I have worked on because of the magnitude of the property and its proximity to population centers."

One Mass Audubon

To strengthen collaboration, Mass Audubon has organized into new regions. The newly formed Berkshire & Connecticut River Valley region encompasses both Pleasant Valley Wildlife Sanctuary in Lenox and Arcadia Wildlife Sanctuary in Northampton and Easthampton, along with a dozen unstaffed sanctuaries that are open to the public (and more on the way!).

Will this change the way you enjoy and support your local sanctuary? No. Sanctuaries will remain the vital community connection points to nature that they have traditionally been. Gifts directed to your favorite sanctuary will still support those special places.

Has this made program offerings more dynamic and maintenance of our properties easier? Yes! We have already experienced the benefits of collaboration happening within the region and through connection to staff in other regions. Educators have spurred each other to adapt creatively to the virtual environment and property staff are sharing their unique skills to problem-solve at more sanctuaries.

Could this increase the impact of Mass Audubon's work? Yes! We are already working more efficiently and effectively. Mass Audubon is also creating an ambitious action agenda to:

- Protect and steward resilient landscapes for people and wildlife
- Advance inclusive and equitable access to nature
- Mobilize to fight climate change

Coordinated action by volunteers, donors, members, and staff across the state will make the realization of these dreams possible. We look forward to sharing a full plan with you in the coming months.

Have questions? Becky (bcushing@massaudubon.org) or Jonah (jkeane@massaudubon.org) would be happy to talk to you.