

River Point Conservation Area

Management Plan



Town of Falmouth

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Map I: Location



I. Summary

The River Point Conservation Area's diversity of habitat and wildlife populations, along with its extensive riparian corridors, makes the parcel one of the premier conservation properties in the town of Falmouth. It also has considerable historical significance, having been inhabited by humans for thousands of years.

The property is popular recreation area. Birders, mountain bikers, snowshoers, geocachers, dog walkers and nature lovers of all kinds use its 1.4 miles of trails. It is also home to several rare plant and animal species.

Access to the property is in jeopardy unless the existing 150-year-old railroad bridge is replaced soon.

Maintaining the property's diverse habitat, and by extension its diverse plant and animal populations, is the primary management goal for the parcel. That can be accomplished by periodic mowing of the existing fields, cutting back select areas to maintain early successional habitat, and controlling invasive plants.

Given the high natural resource value of this property, it should be permanently protected by a conservation easement.

II. Description

River Point is a 41-acre conservation property that borders all three of Falmouth's rivers: the Presumpscot, and the East and West Branches of the Piscataqua River (Map I). It is bordered by those rivers on the east and south; by railroad tracks to the north; and by state-owned land to the west. A pedestrian bridge across the West Branch connects the parcel to the Adam property, a portion of which is encumbered by a conservation easement held by the Falmouth Land Trust. Falmouth Conservation Corps volunteers built that bridge in 2009

The property was acquired by the town in 1999 as part of an agreement with the developer of the Falmouth Crossing Shopping



The wooden access bridge needs to be replaced soon. Conservation Corps volunteers built new railings in 2012.

Center. Only a few wetland acres of the property are encumbered by a conservation easement, placed there as compensation for wetland development in the shopping center area.

River Point is accessed from the shopping center, over a wooden bridge spanning the railroad right of way. That bridge, built in 1859 and known as Clifford Bridge, is the only railroad bridge in the state of Maine that goes to one house. It is rapidly deteriorating however, can no longer support vehicle traffic and is even marginal for pedestrian use.



The Hobbs family, who settled the property in 1775, built the now abandoned brick house on the property. Once a two-story structure, it burned in the 1960s along with its attached barn. The existing barn was built after the fire.

Prior to the colonial era, River Point was the first campsite on the Presumpscot River

used by Native Americans as they traveled from the coast to Sebago Lake. An archeological dig done by the Maine Historic Preservation Commission in 2009 uncovered many artifacts dated from 500-3,600 years ago, including the second largest Paleo-Indian pot found in Maine. It is eligible for National History Site designation.

The Hobbs family farmed the property, which once totaled 151 acres and extended to Route 100 and Leighton Road. They also operated a brickyard and a shingle mill on the West Branch. Farming continued on portions of the property until the late 1990s.



Beaver are common in the rivers adjoining River Point.

The most striking feature of River Point is its diversity of habitat, and its diverse wildlife, especially its bird population. There are several distinct regions found within the property.

The *Upper Plateau*, where the house and barn are located, is mostly open field that will soon grow into woodland if not mowed. There are at least two dug wells and one drilled well in this area. A large information kiosk with trail map is also located here.

The *Brickyard* is an excavated basin immediately below the plateau. Here marine clay was transformed into bricks, which were then shipped on the river. It is now mostly grassland, with a border of young forest growing along the wall of the basin.



Invasive growth in the Lower Field.

The *Klondike* is the wooded area in the northeast corner of the property, extending from the upper plateau to the West Branch. It contains scattered mature white pine, red maple and black cherry trees, but is mostly covered with alder and other small trees and shrubs. Two small ponds are also located here, one a documented vernal pool, adding to its habitat value. The Klondike is largely inaccessible. New England cottontail rabbits and wood turtles are two rare species believed to inhabit this region of the property.

The *Middle Field* is grassland. On its southern edge is a ridge of land known as the *Orchard*. It still has a few remaining apple trees, but is rapidly growing up into forest. A patch of woodlot separates the Orchard from the *Lower Field* that borders the Presumpscot. This field was a cornfield as recently as the late 1990s, but is rapidly growing into forest. The archeology dig was conducted near the juncture of the Presumpscot and East Branch, pinpointing this area as the location of both the Native American campsite and the Hobbs family's first cabin.

The *Peninsula* is the piece of land that abuts the West Branch before it joins the East Branch. It is a mix of young forest and grassland, rapidly growing up to forest. On the eastern edge of the Peninsula is the *Oxbow*, evidence that the West Branch once flowed west of its present course.

Map II: River Point Locations, Trails



Over 250 plant species have been identified on the property, including several rare or unusual species. The latter include Hollow Stem Joe Pye Weed, an S2 plant in Maine (found in <20 locations); Cancer Root; Foxglove Beardtongue; and a rare variety of hawthorn. Shagbark hickory, blue beech and basswood trees grow along the river corridors. It is also one of the few documented nesting sites in Maine for blue-winged warblers.

Three utility right of way easements cross the property, two Central Maine Power lines and a Portland Water District water line.

III. Conservation Values

The conservation values being protected in the River Point Conservation Area include:

- The diverse habitat it provides for a wide variety of wildlife, including beaver, red fox, cottontail rabbits, and other small and large mammal species; bird populations, including hawks, woodcock, cuckoos, warblers, vireos and many other bird species; and a wide variety of vertebrate and invertebrate animals that live, breed and migrate through there.
- Its wetlands, including the two ponds and the extensive riparian corridors along all three rivers.
- The watershed protection the property contributes to surface and groundwater quality. By moderating run-off and absorbing rain and snowfall, the parcel protects the water quality in the Piscataqua and Presumpscot Rivers, and Casco Bay.
- The aesthetic value this easily accessible property offers in an otherwise highly developed area of town, only five miles from downtown Portland.

IV. Visitor Experience

River Point Conservation Area is a nature lover's and amateur naturalist's paradise. The diverse habitat, with its fields, woods and

wetlands, provide the visitor with an excellent opportunity to observe wildlife and commune with nature.

Its extensive 1.4 mile trail system provides visitors with the opportunity to take both short and long hikes. While a popular destination for hikers, birders, and dog walkers, the property is large enough that visitors can be spread out enough to give them the opportunity for a solitary nature experience.

River Point is also an excellent educational laboratory. Both Maine Audubon and the Wild Bird Center sponsor birding trips to the property, and for the past two years the Biodiversity Research Institute has been banding birds from April to October.

They host visits by school children and often explain their work to visitors to the property. Interpretive signs have been placed on various trees to help visitors identify their species.



West Branch bridge: The Lower East Branch Trail starts here and extends to the High School.

V. Deed / Easement Provisions

Although River Point is one of the most valuable conservation properties owned by the town, only 4.4 acres are protected by through two separate conservation easements (see maps, page 11 & 12). There are no restrictions concerning the current use

of the remainder of the parcel or any potential future development.

Neither easement is held by a third party (e.g. – a land trust), although they have been recorded. The Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is responsible for enforcing its terms. Those terms for the Klondike area easement, 2.7 acres in size and put on the property by the developer of the shopping center, include:

- No extraction of gravel or minerals;
- No dumping or storage of waste;
- No topographic alterations;
- No cutting or spraying of vegetation with biocides;
- No buildings allowed;
- No motorized vehicles or equipment allowed, unless needed to make emergency repairs or maintain drainage courses;
- Trails are permitted.

The prohibition on cutting vegetation, using biocides, or mechanical equipment appear to preclude any habitat alterations (cutting, mowing) in the protected area and invasive plant control, something contrary to the goal of maintaining the parcel's diverse habitat.

The second easement was done to mitigate wetlands impact caused by construction of the high school in 1999. It covers 1.7-acres of land in a portion of the lower field. The only restrictions are on construction of buildings and disturbance of soil within the area.

VI. Management Goals

The overarching management goal for River Point Conservation Area is to maintain the diverse habitat found on the property in ways that continue to support its wide variety of wildlife and plant species.

Maintaining the existing fields as grassland is the greatest challenge. Most of these fields are rapidly growing up into trees and shrubs. While some transitional growth is desirable, especially in the lower field, it is still important to maintain portions of that

field, the middle field, the brickyard basin, and the upper plateau as grassland habitat. To do that these fields will need periodic mowing and/or burning to control woody growth. Since there is no legal way to get a tractor and brush hog onto the property, little mowing can be done until the access bridge is replaced.



Brown honeysuckle is one of the most common invasives on River Point.

A related goal is to control the many invasive terrestrial plants growing on the property. Multi-flora rose, honeysuckle, buckthorn, autumn olive, bittersweet, barberry, and purple loosestrife all grow on the parcel. Left unchecked, these species will outcompete native species and soon degrade the wildlife habitat present there.

A successful invasive control effort was begun in the summer of 2012 and many hundreds of invasive plants were killed in the Peninsula; Middle and Lower fields; Brickyard and rim; Orchard; and Upper Plateau. More control work remains to be done in those areas as new plants seed in. There are also many invasives in the Klondike that have been yet to be treated. Finally, a patch of Japanese knotweed growing at the junction of the West and East Branches should be mowed a half dozen or more times per year to try and control this infestation.

Creating New England cottontail habitat is also a prime management goal, a process that will also benefit the many other wildlife species that require early successional forest habitat. While the Klondike and the southern edge of the orchard provide some cottontail

habitat, many of the plants there have grown too tall to provide adequate food and cover. Cutting back the taller plants and creating clear-cut strips through the area will do much to restore the early successional habitat.

Maintaining the property's recreational quality and educational value is another management goal. The 1.4 miles of trail are generally in good condition, although more bog bridging is needed in the Brickyard and a footbridge is needed on the Perimeter Trail where it crosses the Middle Field drainage slough.



The endangered New England cottontail needs brushy habitat to survive.

Balancing human use of the property with the goal of maintaining its robust wildlife populations is a final management goal. Dogs are one area of special concern given the negative impact they can have on wildlife. So far, dog owners have mostly honored a posted requirement that dogs be leashed from 1 Apr to 30 Sep.

In summary, River Point management goals include:

- Maintain the grassland habitat found in the Upper Plateau, Middle & Lower Fields, Orchard, and Brickyard through periodic mowing.
- Allow new early successional habitat to take over portions of the Lower Field.

- Rejuvenate the early successional stage plant cover in the Klondike and eastern edge of the Orchard.
- Control invasive plants on the property by killing existing populations and monitoring the property for regeneration.
- Maintain the recreational and educational value the property offers visitors by maintaining trails and inviting groups to visit the property, while trying to minimize visitor impact.

VII. Management Activities

Access

The primary obstacle to realizing the management goals for River Point is the deteriorated condition of the railroad bridge that provides access to the parcel. Unless replaced soon, the property will soon become inaccessible to both visitors and property managers. Finding a solution to this problem is imperative.

Trails

Trails need to be mowed several times a year where they pass through fields. The recent acquisition of a Billy Goat field mower will make this task much easier. The mower can be stored in the barn, but before doing so that building needs to be made more secure. The mower can also be used to mow the patch of knotweed in hopes of eradicating it.

Trail improvements are needed in two areas. Another 100-120 feet of bog bridging is needed where the Perimeter Trail crosses the Brickyard and a 16-ft. bridge is needed across the Middle Field drainage slough. Both projects will be completed in 2013.

Although signs state that motorized vehicles are prohibited, their use has been a problem on the parcel. Signage should be posted asking visitors to report such violations to the Falmouth Police Department.

Dead trees that pose a trail safety hazard will need to be removed as circumstances require.

Wildlife Management / Forestry

Maintaining the diversity of plant and animal species on River Point requires that habitat diversity be maintained. Unless that is done, the entire property will grow into mature forest.

Fields need to be mowed, especially the areas of the Lower Field that should be retained as grassland. Burning might also help retain the grassland. Once a new bridge is in place, it and the other fields need to be brushed hogged every few years.

A crew with loppers and chainsaws needs to create clearcut swaths through the Klondike to regenerate the early succession habitat in that region of the property. The Maine Wild Turkey Federation paid for a plan for doing this work.

No other forest management activities are needed or desired on the property barring any catastrophic event.

Invasives

Invasive regeneration needs to be controlled in the areas where mature plants have been eliminated and an effort should be launched to tackle the invasives growing in the Klondike (primarily honeysuckle, bittersweet, and buckthorn). Falmouth Conservation Corps volunteers will do this work on an ongoing basis.

Education

The Biodiversity Institute will continue their bird banding work on River Point in 2013 and schools other organizations will be encouraged to use the property as a destination for field trips.

Hunting & Trapping

Hunting and trapping are permitted at River Point, although few people chose to do so. The rivers provide good duck hunting, and deer, turkey, beaver and game bird populations are healthy. Public notices that hunting is permitted are posted in season.

Buildings

The existing house has become an attractive nuisance, used by homeless people

as shelter on occasion, stripped of its copper pipes, and a target for vandalism and graffiti. Given its deteriorated condition, it should be removed by having the Fire Department burn it down as a training exercise.

The barn is in good condition, but does need some minor repairs to the walls, doors and roof. It has recently been electrified and water provided. It is used by the Biodiversity Research Institute and for events on the property. It can also be used for mower storage once it has been secured.



Banding operations at River Point offer a great educational opportunity for visitors.

Stewardship

The Ombudsman has overall stewardship responsibility for the property, with Conservation Corps volunteers providing the bulk of the labor needed to implement the management goals. Boundary signs have been placed on all sides of the perimeter.

VIII. Future Opportunities / Plans

There is potential for expanding the property to both the east and west. To the west, the Department of Transportation, owner of the state land, has expressed a willingness to donate the property to the town once they use it for its mitigation value.

To the east, the Adam land, 38-acres of mostly grassland, is not developable due to a lack of a right of way across the railroad tracks. It may come up for sale and be obtainable for reasonable price.

The terms of the existing conservation easement on 2.7-acres of the property, and the lack of an easement on the remaining 38.3-acres, is a concern. Initially, it was believed that the town might use this land as part of a mitigation deal that would generate revenue to the town. The way mitigation is handled now makes that possibility highly unlikely since its development threat would be considered low.

As growth pressure rises in the greater Portland area in the coming decades, a future town government might consider selling the property for development if the property is not permanently protected. Arguably, River Point is the single most ecologically valuable conservation property in Falmouth. The idea of placing a conservation easement on remaining property should be considered, perhaps exempting the ±4-acres in Upper Plateau area to allow for some future development (e.g. – a nature center, etc.). At the same time, the terms of the existing easement could be modified to align with this plan.

The trail system on the property is complete and need only be maintained, not expanded.

IX. Budget Summary

Other than a new bridge, there is little to do on the property that will require more money. A new bridge and more bog bridging can be done with existing materials, as can signage. Improvements to the barn may cost \$300 at most. Herbicide costs may total \$500 per year.

An easement would cost approximately \$5,500, \$5,000 for a stewardship fee and \$500 in legal work.

X. Long-term Management Issues

Maintaining the barn over the long-term will require some periodic expense. Keeping the roof in good repair will minimize this cost by keeping water out of the building. It will also need painting every decade or so.

The trail bridges and bog bridges are made of pressure treated wood and are designed to last 10-15 years. So too is the information kiosk, which should last even longer. The 60-ft. bridge spanning the West Branch is made of aluminum and set on a platform of pressure treated wood. That platform will likely have to be replaced in 25-30 years; the aluminum span should last a century or more. Blazes and signage may need replacing in 10-15 years as they fade.

The cost of all these improvements is hard to estimate, but may approach \$15-20,000 in today's dollars. A new access bridge should last more than a century and will surely cost a great many future dollars to replace at the end of its useful life.

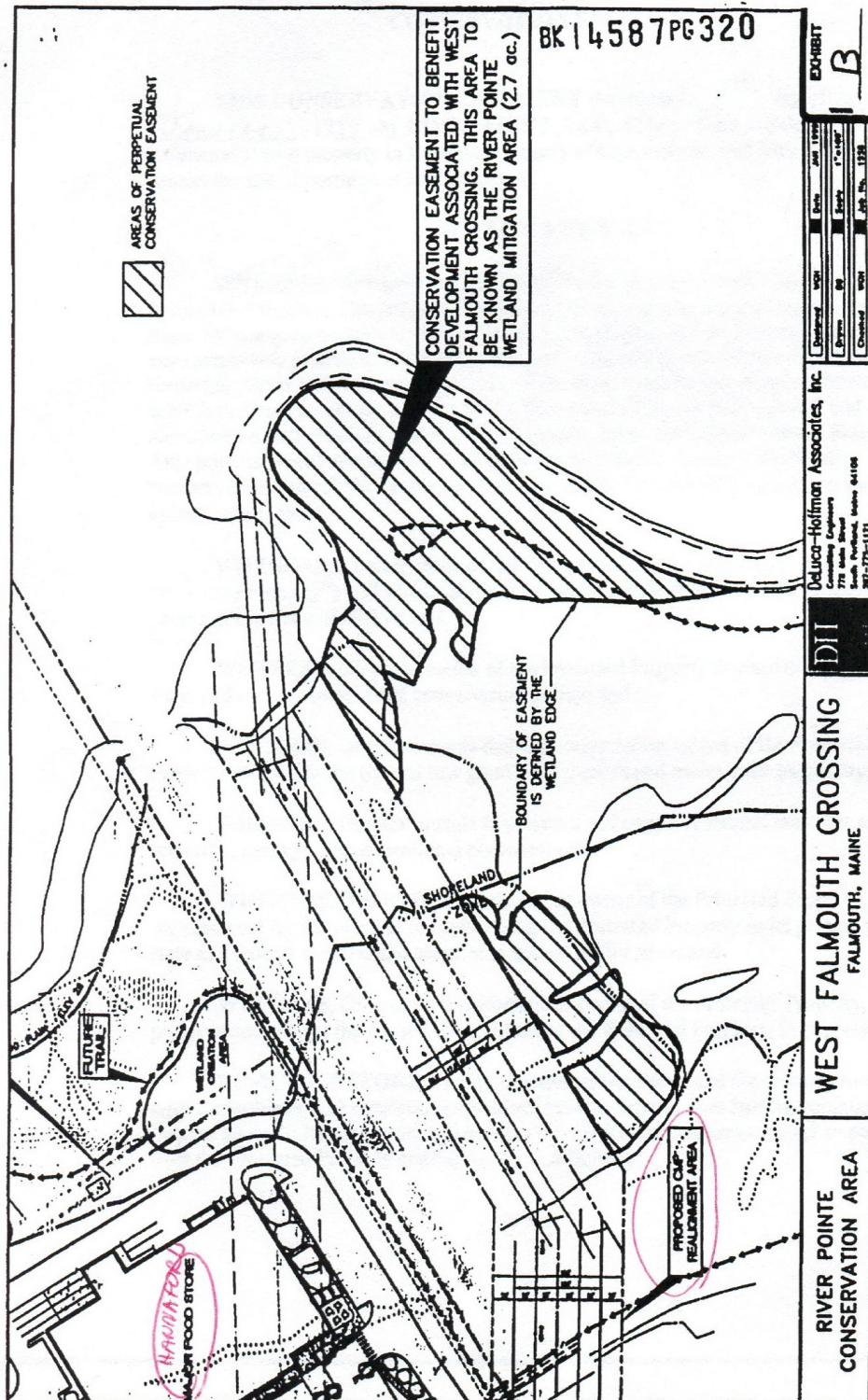


The barn has been painted since this picture was taken. It will need routine maintenance in coming years.

Table I: Summary of Management Tasks

Goal	Task	Action Steps	When	Who	Cost	Other
<i>Upgrade existing trails.</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Build bog bridges in the Brickyard section of the Perimeter Trail. Build a 16 ft. bridge over the Middle Field drainage. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Schedule the work early in the season. Get materials to the sites. Build structures. 	Spring 2013	Conservation Corps Partially Accomplished	\$0	Materials already on hand.
<i>Improve wildlife habitat.</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Reclaim grassland habitat in the Lower Field. Regenerate shrub growth in the Klondike and Orchard rim. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Mow sections to be retained as grassland. Clear-cut swaths as per USF&W biologist's recommendations. 	Summer 2013	Conservation Corps, Wild Turkey Federation volunteers	\$60	Budget to cover the cost of mower & chainsaw fuel.
<i>Control invasive species.</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor invasive regeneration in previously treated areas. Treat remaining invasives. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor treated areas at least 2X during the growing season; treat as needed. Mow knotweed growth 5-6X during the growing season. Cut and treat mature invasives as found. 	2013	Conservation Corps Partially Accomplished	\$500	Cost of herbicides and labor.
<i>Control ATV use.</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Post signage asking trail users to report violations to the police. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Post signs at the bridge and on the boundary between state and town land. 	Spring 2013	Accomplished Ombudsman	\$0	Signs in hand.
<i>Replace railroad bridge.</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Determine possible replacement bridge options, including costs. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Select best option. Get bids. Arrange financing, RR permissions. Initiate work. 	2013?	Ombudsman, Town Manager	\$500K?	Exploratory work is underway.
<i>Promote public use of the property.</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Organize public events on the property. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage outside groups to conduct field trips, educational activities. Organize events w/FLT & Community Programs. 	Ongoing	Ombudsman, Community Programs, Falmouth Land Trust	\$0	
<i>Permanently protect the property.</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Place a conservation easement on remaining acreage, less Upper Plateau. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Draft a proposed easement. Get Council consideration. 	2014	Ombudsman, Town Manager	\$5,300	Stewardship fund contribution to easement holder; legal fees.
<i>Expand property</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Pursue donation of the state land. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Call DOT person in charge. 	2013	Ombudsman	\$0	

Map III: Easement Protected Area #1

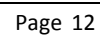


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Initial plan developed February 2013

Approved by the Land Management & Acquisition Committee: _____ (date)

Approved by Parks & Community Program Director: _____ (date)

Approved by the Town Manager: _____ (date)

Approved by the Town Council: _____ (date)
