



Vermont Coverts Woodlands for Wildlife

A newsletter of Vermont Coverts: Woodlands for Wildlife, Inc.

Volume 60 Fall 2022

NOTE FROM OUR PRESIDENT

Rich Chalmers, *Class of 2005 Spring*



It is nice to see the porcupine featured in the Coverts newsletter. It is an impressive animal and fulfills an important role in the forest.

Our woods have dense stands of conifer and old legacy trees left over from the pasture days. We often see porcupines out doing their thing or denning up for the day.

One den tree, an ancient, sharply leaning yellow birch was occupied, off and on, for many years. It had a huge pile of scat below its penthouse.

One day I went to check the pile to see if the den was active and got plonked on the back of the head. I thought I heard a chuckle from above, or maybe that was my walking companions.

That old tree has since fallen down, changing its role, but no less important. The porcupines have found other places to den, and we check on them from time to time, appreciating these interesting creatures and their contributions to the forest.

Speaking of appreciation, a heartfelt thank you to those who have given to our annual fund drive and those who will do so in December. We need your support to help ensure that the things we value about our woodlands and wildlife continue into the future.

Spread the word about Coverts. Take a moment to reach out to friends, neighbors, and people who are interested in wildlife and land stewardship. Invite them to consider the Cooperator Training, attend a workshop, and donate to the annual fund drive. Walk with them in the woods, explore, listen, and connect.

This is our peer-to-peer network in action.

Sincerely,

Rich Chalmers

Rich Chalmers
President



Top: Bark stripped by porcupine
Bottom: Porcupine in a Hemlock tree



MISSION Enlist Vermont landowners in a long-term commitment to maintain and enhance diverse wildlife habitat and healthy ecosystems.

NEW EXTENSION FORESTER

Dr. Alexandra Kosiba (Ali)



UVM Extension has hired an Extension Forester. This is the position Vermont Coverts' founder Thom McEvoy held for many years. We welcome Dr. Alexandra Kosiba (Ali) as the new forestry specialist, based out of the extension office in South Burlington.

Ali, a licensed Vermont forester, spoke at our annual meeting on forest carbon. She brings expertise in several forestry related fields, including climate-adaptive forest management, forest carbon science and management, tree physiology, and forest ecology and health.

As Extension Forester her target audience is landowners, foresters, and municipalities. She will also partner with state agencies and members of the forest economy, including loggers, producers and non-profits.

In her new role, she will also continue some of the work she started in her previous position with the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation. This entails leading the Vermont forest carbon inventory and serving as the state's point person for foresters and landowners on forest carbon and carbon offset markets.

The U. S. Forest Service recently awarded her a grant through its Landscape Scale Restoration grant program. One of the goals of this project is to determine what landowners, foresters and others need in order to include climate resilience in forest decisions and management. VT Coverts looks forward to partnering with her on this initiative.

We are excited to see this position filled and to have Ali fill the ex officio position on our board designed for the UVM Extension Forester.

The Amherst, Massachusetts native earned her master's of science degree and her doctorate in forest science from UVM's Rubenstein School of Environment

and Natural Resources.

Ali lives in West Bolton on 10 acres of forestland in a house that she built with her husband. They manage their land for recreation and climate resilience as well as harvest firewood and saw timber.

You can reach Ali at (802) 651-8343, ext. 504, or alexandra.kosiba@uvm.edu.

PORCUPINE: FOREST ECOSYSTEM ENGINEERS

Lisa Sausville, Executive Director



The first porcupine I remember seeing in the wild was at Cooperator Peter Upton's in Hubbardton. It was my first year with Coverts and we were visiting his property during the fall Training. Someone spotted the porcupine high up in a tree.

Then this August, coming home late at night, we almost collided with two porcupines in the middle of the road right by my house. It got me thinking of how I don't often see these amazing mammals.

Porcupines (*Erethizon dorsatum*) are active year-round but are mostly nocturnal. Likely the reason why I don't often see them. They are slow moving and have poor eyesight. The pair I saw certainly demonstrated that as I had to come to a full stop before they ambled away.

They are classified as a rodent second only in size to the beaver (*Castor canadensis*). Weighing in between 12 to 15 pounds, porcupines have short legs, long claws, and a high arching back. They are excellent tree climbers and rely on their keen sense of smell and hearing to avoid predators.

They do however have a strong defense against predators should they meet one. Porcupines are known for their distinctive coat of barbed quills. They have as many as 30,000 quills that can be quite dangerous if they come into contact with a would-be predator.

If approached first a porcupine will try to find cover. If they cannot they hunker down and try to keep their back to their attacker swinging their tail. Most predators avoid them as their quills, which work their way in as muscles contract, can prove deadly.

Porcupines rely on extensive forest habitat to meet their lifecycle needs. Like the beaver, porcupines are ecosystem engineers. They create habitat for other species and are a food source for some predators here, specifically the fisher (*Pekania pennanti*). Porcupines are found most often in coniferous forests but they also frequent mixed and deciduous stands.

Porcupines are herbivores eating a wide variety of plants. Their varied diet changes depending on the season and location, eating twigs and buds, leaves and roots, nuts, berries, and other fruits. In the winter they mainly feed on conifer needles and tree bark often ripping through the outer bark to get to the inner bark and cambium (see picture on page 1).

This penchant for trees can cause challenges in orchards or our woodlots. But porcupines contribute to ecological stability improving the diversity in our forested ecosystem. In low densities damage is negligible whereas the benefits are numerable.

Their chewing on bark can lead to the suppression of tree growth or to the deformity or death of a tree. This in turn opens the canopy allowing sunlight to reach the forest floor increasing plant diversity in the understory.

Standing dead or downed trees can provide nest sites and other benefits to wildlife. During the Cooperator Training we stress the importance of leaving snags and standing dead trees and how these are good for wildlife and forest health. The porcupine assists in creating these opportunities.

Porcupines are known to be solitary except during the fall breeding season or sometimes denning together in the winter. They have only one offspring, a porcupette, each year after reaching sexual maturity in their second or third year.

Signs of porcupine include cut twigs and missing patches of bark with chew marks. Their droppings and cut stems are often visible around feeding trees and outside dens, especially in winter. Their tracks, most easily visible in winter, show four toes in the front and five in the back with claw marks. One can also often see where the tail has dragged. In deeper snow the porcupine trail has been described as a channel or trench through the snow.

I remember finding a den a few years ago on a wildlife management area. It was so clearly a porcupine den and a very exciting find. If you find one, take some pictures and upload them to i-Naturalist.

Porcupines are noted as common in Vermont with their population size varying depending on food availability and habitat. Fishers are thought to keep the porcupine population in check. When fishers were extirpated from Vermont, porcupine populations increased and were

adversely affecting the forest regeneration.

Fishers were reintroduced to Vermont starting in 1959. Their quickness and agility make them effective predators of porcupine. Like the porcupine they are low to the ground and can climb trees. The fishers speed enables them to attack the face first and then flip the porcupine to expose its fleshy underbelly. Reintroducing fisher helped to bring a greater balance back to the ecosystem.

Other conflicts we have with porcupine arise from their need for salt. Feeding on low quality foods in winter can lead to a deficiency of salt. Their need for salt and to gnaw down their teeth can lead them to chew on structures, tools, leather gloves and boots. In the early spring they can often be found on the side of the road where they are foraging on the heavily salted vegetation, increasing their chances of being hit by a car.

Landowners play an important role in safeguarding habitats necessary for porcupines to persist in the future. With a changing climate and other threats to our forests we need to learn to coexist with these ecosystem engineers to ensure forest health.



Porcupine den in winter.

VERMONT COVERTS BOOK GROUP CONTINUES IN 2023

The book group is entering its third year of meeting. The books selected for 2023 include *Nature's Best Hope* by Doug Tallamy, *Eager: The Surprising, Secret Life of Beavers and Why they Matter* by Ben Goldfarb and *The Accidental Ecosystem: People and Wildlife in American Cities* by Peter S. Alagona. We have a few spots available if you would like to join in the discussions. We meet every other month online. We will begin with Tallamy's book on January 31, the last Tuesday of the month. To join e-mail lisa@vtcoverts.org.



Vermont Coverts Woodlands for Wildlife

Vermont Coverts: Woodlands for Wildlife, Inc.
PO Box 328, Vergennes, VT 05491

PRSR STD
US POSTAGE
PAID
PUTNEY, VT
PERMIT #1

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Lisa Sausville
Lisa@vtcoverts.org 802-877-2777

VERMONT COVERTS COUNCIL

Skip Abelson, *Sudbury*
Dawn Andrews, treasurer, *Cabot*
Jon Bouton, *Hartford*
Lauren Blume, *Milton*
Alan Calfee, ex officio, *Rupert*
Rich Chalmers, president, *Williamstown*
Sabina Ernst, *Jericho*
Donna Foster, secretary, *Sharon*
Lenny Gerardi, *St Johnsbury*
John Hawkins, S. *Strafford*
Ali Kosiba, ex officio, *Burlington*
Bob Lloyd, ex officio, *Rutland*
John McNerney, *Monkton*
Owen Rogal, vice president, *Hancock*
Kimberly Royar, ex officio, *Wallingford*
Richard Saunders, ex officio, *Milton*
Andrea Shortsleeve, ex officio, *Barre*
Tim Stout, *Burlington*
Keith Thompson, ex officio, *Burlington*



ANNUAL DRIVE UPDATE \$5,000 CHALLENGE

We are excited to announce a special challenge. If we reach our \$37,000 goal by Dec 31st, we will receive an additional \$5,000.

Help us reach this goal! Your support will help us ensure resilient forests with connected wildlife habitat.

Donate online at www.vtcoverts.org
or mail in your gift.

Every bit counts! Donate today!
Keep Vermont Coverts growing strong!