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Photos: There are nearly two miles of cascading tributaries of the Ottauquechee River on the Preserve. (Photo by Shelby Perry, Northeast Wilderness Trust)

The mature forest of the new Bramhall Wilderness Preserve lies just south of the Appalachian Trail. (Photo by Daryl Burtnett)

New Wilderness Preserve Created in Bridgewater

BRIDGEWATER, VT - Northeast Wilderness Trust purchased 359 acres from Paedra Bramhall last week, creating the first privately protected, forever-wild preserve in the Chateaugay No-Town Conservation Area. The Wilderness Trust is a non-profit land trust that conserves forever-wild landscapes for nature and people.

The newly established Bramhall Wilderness Preserve is home to pristine cascading brooks, towering trees, and abundant wildlife. Protecting this land has been a long-time effort for landowner Paedra Bramhall, who was born in a rustic cabin on the property without running water or electricity in the 1940s.

“The fact that this dream I have had most of my life is now a reality [for] the acres my mom left me—that they are now and will be forever wild—is still sinking in,” said Ms. Bramhall.

Since Ms. Bramhall has left the land largely unmanaged for decades, the forest is already well on its way to returning to old-growth.

“Old and wild forests like the Bramhall Wilderness Preserve are among the best natural tools we have to address the dual crises of climate change and biodiversity loss,” says Jon Leibowitz, Executive Director of the Wilderness Trust. “They are remarkably effective at storing vast amounts of carbon, and they offer habitats to a wide array of species that will need space to move and adapt as the climate becomes hotter and more unpredictable.”

The Preserve lies just south of the Appalachian Trail as it winds its way down from the Green Mountains to the Connecticut River. Nearly two miles of waterways, including the North Branch of the Ottauquechee River and two smaller tributaries, tumble through the steep hills of the Preserve. Dense hemlocks shade the water, creating prime habitat for native brook trout.

Northeast Wilderness Trust is working with the Vermont River Conservancy (VRC) and the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (VHCB) on the permanent conservation of the land. VRC and VHCB will co-hold forever-wild legal protections on the preserve.

“We are excited to partner with Northeast Wilderness Trust for the sake of public access to the rivers in the beautiful Bramhall Preserve,” says Lydia Menendez Parker, Assistant Director of VRC. “Low-impact recreational access paths from the parking pull-out will support those adventurers looking for a place to dip in the cool, refreshing waters and cast a line.”

VHCB played a key role in protecting the land with a \$160,000 grant. “VHCB is pleased to support the conservation of this special property,” said Gus Seelig, Executive Director of VHCB. “Situated as it is in the center of 60,000 acres of managed forestland in federal, state, municipal and private ownership, this core block of land will remain forever wild and provide permanent public access for swimming, hunting, fishing, and hiking. The Bramhall Wilderness Preserve will create a unique learning laboratory for scientists, naturalists, and educators to compare natural processes over time to the managed forestland surrounding it, helping community members and visitors to better understand the ecological benefits of old forest.”

Last semester, Woodstock High School ran a Wilderness Studies class about nature, conservation, and wildlands. The students spent two field days on the Preserve for experiential outdoor learning.

“It is vital that students take time in school to develop their personal relationship with nature, wilderness, and society,” said Sophie Leggett, a student who served as Teaching Assistant for the class. “Moreover, we are lucky to be working with the Northeast Wilderness Trust to have a deep and meaningful educational experience with local wilderness. Using the Bramhall Preserve as a lens for more global thinking, this class is a step in developing personal and cultural values surrounding wilderness.”

The Wilderness Trust prohibits timber harvest, vehicles, trapping, mining, agriculture, subdivision, and development on all forever-wild properties it protects. “Paedra has allowed nature to take charge on this land for decades and we will continue that legacy,” said Shelby Perry, Stewardship Director of Northeast Wilderness Trust. “From this day forward, the forest will always continue to grow old and wild per her wishes, providing diverse wildlife habitat and storing carbon indefinitely.”

The new Bramhall Wilderness Preserve is part of the Wilderness Trust’s Wild Carbon initiative. Through this program, the new Preserve will be aggregated with other Wilderness Trust properties across four states. The goal of the program is to sell carbon credits from the combined properties to generate funds for future wilderness conservation.

“We are far from living in a carbon-neutral world,” explained Sophie Ehrhardt, the Wildlands Partnership Coordinator for Northeast Wilderness Trust. “This carbon project will provide an original model for other organizations who want to preserve land. This program creates income from carbon storage rather than timber harvest.”

The Wilderness Trust’s first Wild Carbon sale was completed in 2016 on two of its Preserves in Maine. “Funding to protect wild places is scarce,” Sophie Ehrhardt added, “so carbon credits are a creative way to build a wilder future.”

Although enough funds were raised to buy and create the Bramhall Preserve, the Wilderness Trust is still working to raise \$204,000 to secure the long-term stewardship and care of the property.

To learn more about this land, visit newwildernesstrust.org/bramhall. If you would like to support the Preserve with a tax-deductible gift, please visit donorbox.org/support-bramhall-preserve or call 802-224-1000.