Trails for People and Wildlife

Hiking, mountain biking, horseback riding, bird watching, cross country skiing, and snowmobiling are all outdoor activities that we enjoy, however even these seeming innocuous activities can have impacts on wildlife including reduced abundance, reproduction, and survival. Thoughtful trail location allows us to get outside to enjoy nature while also minimizing disturbance to wildlife.

The New Hampshire Fish and Game Department has developed a new tool that can be used to assess existing trails and help site new trails in the most wildlife-friendly way. Referred to as “Trails for People and Wildlife” (https://wildlife.state.nh.us/trails/), this mapping tool highlights areas particularly important for wildlife and areas that would be more suitable for trail development. Using the most relevant scientific research for New England, a map was created to highlight areas particularly important for wildlife that, if avoided, would help to minimize trail disturbance to wildlife. This tool works based on the following principals:

- Keep unfragmented trail-free areas as large as possible
- Avoid small patches of high quality or special habitats
- Avoid riparian areas, sensitive areas along wetlands and water bodies that serve as important wildlife corridors
- Avoid locations of rare wildlife

After a trail is reviewed based on this assessment, the next step is to consider the trail’s corridor of influence. Wildlife can hear and see people approaching even when they are quite a distance from a trail. The distance from a trail that wildlife will be alert or will flee from someone using a trail depends on the type of wildlife. Based on available research, reptiles and amphibians will flee as little as 60 feet away. Birds will flee at 60 feet, but will become alert due to someone's presence as much as 150 feet from a trail. Mammals will be alerted up to 400 feet away. The amount of habitat that is being impacted by existing trails or by a new proposed trail layout can be evaluated by looking at these alert and flight distances of wildlife.

Alerting and fleeing can impact wildlife in a variety of ways that most of us may not be aware of, from disturbing mating and nesting rituals to excessive calorie consumption in the colder winter months. This can lead to reduced abundance, reproduction, and survival. Below is a link to a recent NY Times article that further discusses the impacts recreation can have on wildlife: https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/opinion/sunday/leaving-only-footsteps-think-again.html.

For more information about the Trails for People and Wildlife tool visit https://wildlife.state.nh.us/trails/. A guidebook that will provide more information on the impacts of trails on wildlife and how to use the tool to assess a trail layout will be available to the public by the end of the summer (2019).