

Conservation Matters

A monthly column focused on conservation education, as the result of collaboration among several area conservation commissions and organizations. If your town's commission or conservation organization would like to contribute articles, please contact Jessica Tabolt Halm jess_tabolt@hotmail.com

Title: Hiking in mud season: Caring for our trails when they are most vulnerable

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With this mild winter it seems mud season has come early this year. Already on the Squam Lakes Association's 50 mile trail network, there is considerable snowmelt, followed by the inevitable mud that comes with it. The SLA closes several of its more popular trails during mud season, at landowner request, to protect the trails and the natural resources of the surrounding area.

Many boots traveling well-hiked trails in the winter months compacts snow causing it to melt slowly. As a result trails often become channels of ice and mud. Later, when the season turns and the snow has largely melted, the trails themselves tend to stay wet and muddy. People, averse to hiking on ice and mud, will avoid these area by hiking around them. This greatly widens the trail, and expands the impacts to the area. Soil erosion exposing roots and rocks, can harm or kill trees close to the impacted area. Beyond the damage to the immediate environment there are a number of additional trail maintenance burdens that could otherwise be avoided.

Trails take a lot of work to maintain. More than \$80,000 and countless volunteer hours have been committed over the years to maintain the Old Bridle Path up West Rattlesnake in Holderness. This popular trail experiences an estimated 30,000 hikers per year. Without regular maintenance, such a popular trail will experience massive erosion, widening, and ultimately complete destruction. On Rattlesnake, the SLA has coordinated trail crews to reroute trails, create stone and wooden steps, and constructed waterbars to control both traffic and water flow. These massive efforts, in combination with regular maintenance efforts performed by volunteers—maintaining waterbars to move water off the trail and brushing in trails to reduce trail creation and widening—mean the Old Bridle Path can handle the high traffic it sees year-round.

Without this labor of love, trails widen, compact, and erode. This impacts the vegetation, habitat, and wildlife in areas adjacent to the trail. Erosion contributes sediment and nutrient input into streams and ultimately larger bodies of water downstream.

Many hikers access the trails to experience the beauty of the nature around them, unaware their hiking habits may be compromising the health of the areas where they hike. What can hikers and walkers do to protect the trails they love? Avoiding hiking during mud season best protects our trails. Usually waiting just a week or two is sufficient time to let trails dry out. However, if avoidance is not an option, hikers first must be prepared for the varied conditions they might experience on the trails. Hiking boots, gators, and traction devices are important to maintain dry feet and grip in mud and ice. Second, hikers should walk through icy and muddy areas instead of around them. This will prevent trail widening and compaction.

Maintaining our favorite hiking trails takes financial and volunteer resources. Dedicated hikers can get involved with their town's conservation commission, local land trusts and other conservation organizations, and the Forest Service to maintain their favorite trail as a volunteer Trail Adopter. We have vast opportunities for hiking and walking in Central New Hampshire, and all these trails require regular maintenance to keep them in great shape.