



Nova Scotia Nature Trust announces successful protection of the heart of beloved urban wilderness

(December 29, 2020, Halifax, Nova Scotia). The Nova Scotia Nature Trust announced this morning that it has successfully completed the purchase of the *Blue Mountain Wilderness Connector*, a 220-hectare (545-acre) property at the heart of the beloved Blue Mountain - Birch Cove lakes. This purchase will ensure that more than 2,023 hectares (5,000 acres) of undeveloped wildlands remain unbroken, securing the future of one of the largest expanses of urban wilderness in North America.

While the vision of this large protected area has been in process for more than a decade, this morning's announcement comes at a time when access to nature is particularly meaningful: the continuing restrictions of Covid-19 have inspired many Nova Scotians to spend more time than ever with nature over the past months. "We are seeing an explosion of excitement to get outside," says Bonnie Sutherland, Executive Director of the Nature Trust. "People are really appreciating the joy and refreshment that nature can provide, even if it's just their own backyard." And just minutes from downtown Halifax and accessible by public transit, the Blue Mountain - Birch Cove Lakes area is a natural "backyard" stunningly rich in recreational opportunities as well as ecological significance.

This vast undeveloped area lies between Hammonds Plains, Timberlea, and Halifax and encompasses a mosaic of extensive forests, bogs and wetlands, rocky barrens and hills, sparkling rivers and three pristine headwater lakes. The diverse habitats support over 150 species of birds including loons, osprey and woodpeckers, and many species listed on Canada's Species at Risk Act (SARA), including Canada Warbler (Threatened), Olive-sided Flycatcher (Threatened), and Common Nighthawk (Threatened).

Hikers, paddlers, birdwatchers and anglers have long treasured the diversity of wild landscapes it boasts, as well as its proximity to Halifax. "You don't need a car to get there," says Dr. Dusan Soudek, retired family physician and long-time Nature Trust volunteer. "You don't have to set aside several days to go have that remote outdoor experience, you can just go for a few hours after work. It's reachable, which means that the health benefits of outdoor activity are reachable, too."

While final boundaries and type of protected area are still to be determined for the broader Blue Mountain - Birch Cove Lakes area, the Nature Trust, community groups, the Municipality and



the Province all share a common vision of a large protected urban wildland. In 2009 and 2015, the Province designated two large Crown land blocks as Wilderness Area, protecting 1767 hectares (4366 acres). Then in 2018 and 2019, the Municipality purchased and added 210 hectares (519 acres) of private lands. Those lands were not contiguous, however, and citizens were growing increasingly concerned about threats to this highly strategic and significant property. Since neither the Province nor the Municipality was actively pursuing the “Wild Blue” connector, the Nature Trust stepped in. The newly protected connector property bridges the large gap between these previously protected sections of wildlands, creating a contiguous 12-kilometer corridor important for wildlife, including the endangered Mainland moose.

The protection of this critical link would not have been possible without the enthusiastic support of the landowners, Robin Wilber and Bill Fenton. They recognized the unique and irreplaceable conservation value of these particular lands and agreed to forgo potential development, instead selling their land to the Nature Trust and generously agreeing to donate a sizable part of the land’s value as a charitable gift. It was donated to the Nova Scotia Nature Trust under the Government of Canada’s Ecological Gifts Program, which provides enhanced tax incentives for individuals or corporations who donate ecologically significant land.

Mr. Wilber noted, “It’s a fantastic thing today - but it will be an absolutely astounding thing in thirty, fifty, a hundred years. As the surrounding area continues to develop over the next decades, the value of having such a large and wild green space within a major city will be more and more deeply appreciated. People will look back at what the Nature Trust did in 2020 and say, Look what we have today because of that.”

The purchase of the connector property was also made possible by significant financial support from a number of major partners:

This project was made possible by the Natural Heritage Conservation Program, an initiative funded by the Canada Nature Fund.

“The COVID-19 pandemic is reminding Canadians how important it is to connect with nature for our health and well-being. The Blue Mountain Wilderness Connector will support our iconic wildlife in Nova Scotia and provide more protected nature for Canadians to enjoy. The Government of Canada is pleased to support this exciting conservation initiative through the Natural Heritage Conservation Program and the Ecological Gifts Program. By working closely with partners like the Nova Scotia Nature Trust, we are making progress towards our goal of conserving a quarter of Canada’s lands by 2025.”

– The Honourable Jonathan Wilkinson, Minister of Environment and Climate Change



The Nova Scotia Crown Share Land Legacy Trust made a significant contribution to the project, in support of its mission to secure and protect ecologically significant, threatened and irreplaceable natural areas on private lands in Nova Scotia.

The City of Halifax contributed from its Park Reserve Fund toward the purchase, in support of its Municipal economic development strategies focused on promoting Halifax as a green and inspiring place to live, work and do business. Urban greenspaces also provide significant ecological services to cities, including clean air and water, flood prevention, carbon sequestration, and climate change mitigation. “When we talk about building a strong, successful and happy Halifax, that includes the important preservation of its still-wild places where we can connect with the natural world,” said Mayor Savage. “I am proud of our Council for supporting this purchase and grateful to the Nova Scotia Nature Trust for presenting us with this opportunity for an additional acquisition in the Blue Mountain - Birch Cove area.”

A number of community organizations also contributed significant funds, including the Nova Scotia Habitat Conservation Fund (Contributions from Hunters and Trappers) and the Five Bridges Wilderness Heritage Trust.

Finally, broad community support and a large number of individual donors pushed the campaign over the finish line. We also greatly appreciate and thank the Ecology Action Centre, the Friends of Blue Mountain Birch Cove Lakes, the Canadian Association of Retired Persons, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society and the many other organizations and individuals who have been working for decades to protect the area and who have been so supportive of the Nature Trust’s efforts.

The Nature Trust’s campaign to Save the Wild Blue is a major milestone in its recently announced campaign to double its protected lands across Nova Scotia by 2023. Through the Twice the Wild campaign, every donation - including donations made to Save the Wild Blue - are matched four to one, meaning that each dollar donated generates four additional dollars from government and other funding partners to save nature.

“Nature gives us so much, from physical and mental health, to habitat for wildlife, to adventures with our families,” says Sutherland. “Saving land like the Wild Blue is a gift that we can give back to nature. And best of all, it’s a gift that we will all get to enjoy, for generations to come.”

ABOUT FUNDING PROGRAMS:

The Government of Canada’s Natural Heritage Conservation Program (NHCP) is a unique public-private partnership to support new protected and conserved areas by securing private



lands and private interests in lands. The program is managed by the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC). Federal funds invested in the program are matched with contributions raised by NCC and its partners, Ducks Unlimited Canada and the country's land trust community.

To learn more about the Ecological Gifts Program, please visit <http://www.ec.gc.ca/pde-egg/>.

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Backgrounder, photos, videos and maps available at <http://nsnt.ca/media>

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