

Wildlands are lands that are permanently protected from development, in which management is explicitly intended to allow natural processes to prevail with “free will” and minimal human interference. Humans have been part of nature for millennia and can coexist within and with Wildlands without intentionally altering their structure, composition, or function.

Rhode Island is a small state with impressive biodiversity: wetlands, estuaries, farmland, forests, and islands. With a majority (52 percent) of the state forested, and with important bird migration corridors and nesting sites, regionally significant dark night skies, and a range of groups dedicated to land conservation, Rhode Island has major underappreciated potential for conserving a network of Wildlands that connects from the ocean up through Connecticut and Massachusetts and beyond.

Wildlands covered most of Rhode Island and New England for thousands of years. Wildlands are vital for nature and society as they:

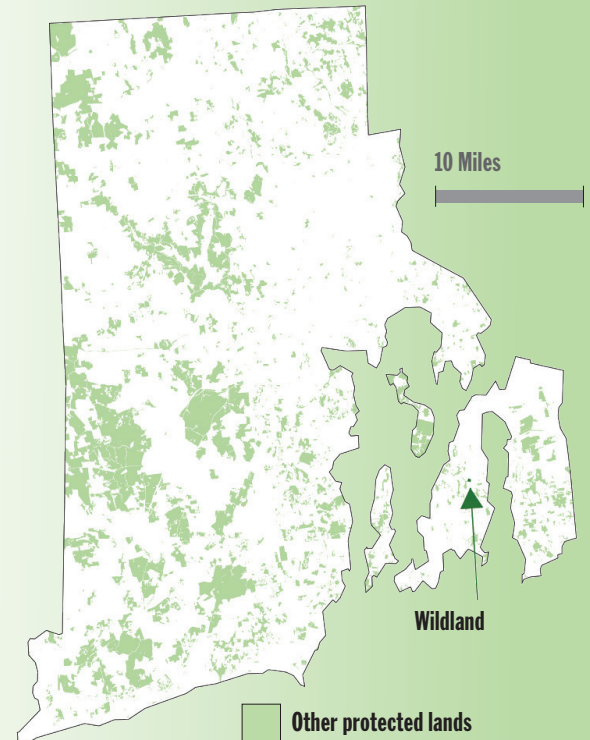
- **Acknowledge and support** the intrinsic value of wild nature to exist
- **Preserve** wildlife habitat and biodiversity
- **Mitigate climate change** by sequestering and storing carbon
- **Enhance landscape resilience** through ecological complexity
- **Offer quiet space** for spiritual and physical renewal
- **Serve as references** for science, management, and conservation
- **Support 30x30**, the global effort to protect biodiversity

Wildlands in New England is the first regional study in the United States to characterize all “forever wild lands” that are protected so that natural processes can prevail, with minimal to no active management. These lands—designated wilderness areas and diverse public and private natural areas and reserves—provide critical support to nature and society. In Rhode Island, Wildlands have not been an explicit part of the state’s land conservation strategy. Recent awareness of this gap in public policy should motivate a just and equitable approach towards a strategic plan.

To reach the goals for Wildlands and improve the landscape resilience of the region, *Wildlands in New England 2023* makes the following recommendations:

- **Center Wildlands** in an integrated approach to land planning and conservation that includes actively managed forests and farms.
- **Strengthen existing Wildlands** through permanent protection and landscape buffering.
- **Create more Wildlands**, thoughtfully and strategically, with a diversity of partners, through private and public action.

Wildland in Rhode Island



As of 2023, just over **20 acres** in Rhode Island is considered **Wildland**.

Rhode Island Wildland

The sole known Wildland in Rhode Island is Oakland Forest, currently owned by Aquidneck Land Trust and dedicated as part of the Old Growth Forest Network, which describes Oakland Forest as below:

Oakland Forest includes a regionally ecologically unique old-growth American beech forest, with trees estimated to be between 200 and 300 years old based on tree coring done in 2000. In addition to beech, the forest includes old-growth tree forms of other species including white oak and red maple. The property was once part of a “gentleman’s farm” owned by the Vanderbilt family in the 1800s and 1900s. There is a row of 100+ year old rhododendrons running through the forest part of the old estate.



State, Regional, and Global Support for Wildlands

The following initiatives make strong cases for Wildlands and emphasize the need for increased permanent protection with measurable targets.

The Rhode Island Natural Area Preserve Program, passed into law in 1993, could be activated and would include Wildlands owned by the public. Thus far there are no Natural Area Preserves, leaving an open opportunity to recommend properties, evaluate them, and establish a network of Wildlands in Rhode Island.

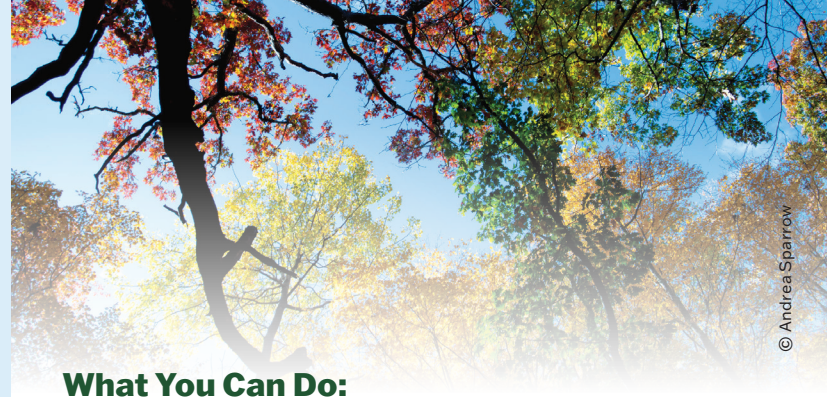
The **Natural Heritage Program** (terminated in 2007) could be reimagined and the **Rhode Island Natural History Survey** could be empowered to be an ongoing resource to document and recommend areas of high conservation value. For example, multiple areas in the Great Swamp have been identified as high priority. The North-South trail and the Wood-Pawcatuck Wild and Scenic River Corridor could be building blocks.

The **Old Growth Tree Society** has been working to identify and protect areas with old-growth forest and/or legacy trees.

Wildlands, Woodlands, Farmlands & Communities (WWF&C) provides a regional vision and state-specific land protection goals that call for at least 70 percent of New England to be protected as forest—at least 10 percent protected as Wildland and 60 percent protected as Woodland (managed forest)—and all existing farmland to be permanently conserved. This vision intentionally values wild and managed forests, farmlands, and communities and relies on the collaboration of conservation efforts across the region.

30x30

Wildlands form a central component of “30x30,” the national and international goal to protect 30 percent of Earth’s land and waters by 2030, addressing the looming challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss, and threats to human health and welfare.



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What You Can Do:

- Visit **Wildlands in New England** to read the report and access related resources.
- Contact **Northeast Wilderness Trust** to learn about their Wildlands Partnership Program.
- Support local, statewide, and regional conservation efforts in implementing Rhode Island’s Natural Area Preserve Program and WWF&C goals.

Rhode Island’s Wildland Conservation Partners:

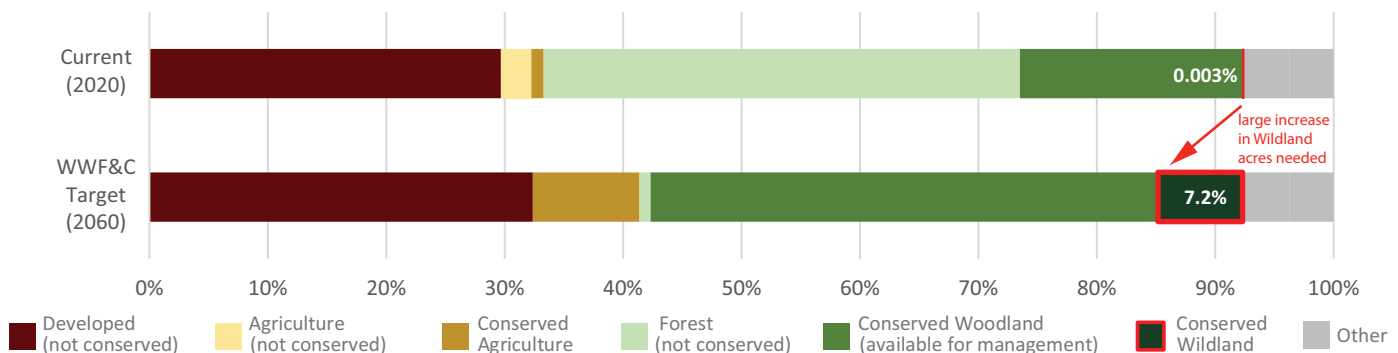
Public

- **State:** Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management
- **Federal:** U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service
- **Regional and Municipal:** Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, Rhode Island Land Trust Council, all municipalities

Private

- Conservation organizations, including The Nature Conservancy, Northeast Wilderness Trust, the Old Growth Forest Network, the Old Growth Tree Society, Audubon Society of Rhode Island, Trust for Public Land, Aquidneck Land Trust
- Colleges, universities, public and private schools

Land Cover in Rhode Island: Current and WWF&C Target



Copies of the full report, the Wildlands web map, and additional information are available on the website of Wildlands, Woodlands, Farmlands & Communities: wildlandsandwoodlands.org/resources/wildlands-in-new-england/

To learn more about ways to directly support Wildlands conservation throughout New England, visit newwildernesstrust.org/

