

Land trust promotes four-season recreation in Grand Lakes area

by Lora Whelan

When Downeast residents think of the Grand Lake Stream area they're most likely to think of fly-fishing and the annual Grand Lake Stream Folk Art Festival. That's just the tip of the iceberg to the recreation opportunities available, explains Downeast Lakes Land Trust (DLLT) Development and Outreach Manager Colin Brown. The land trust has over 55,000 acres that it protects and manages, and surrounding the DLLT land are over 310,000 acres of land held in what are called the Sunrise Easements, with public access and no development guaranteed into perpetuity. It all makes for a rich environment for outdoor enthusiasts and for those looking to dip their toes into new experiences.

DLLT land can be experienced in all four seasons, says Brown. "Snowmobiling and ice fishing are huge." During the winter two local volunteer clubs, the Grand Lakes Snowmobile Club and the Grand Lake Stream ATV Club, each manage over 80 miles of trail just within the Downeast Lakes Community Forest. Brown notes that the deep water of West Grand Lake is a particularly good spot for ice fishing. "I've seen folks pulling out 40" fish," he says. For those who prefer their winter sports on foot, "All the hiking trails are great for snowshoeing," and the Musquash Esker Trail, while not groomed, is a good one for cross-country skiing, he adds.

The spring, summer and fall, when people are well prepared for the blackflies and mosquitoes, have the added benefit of lake paddling, with DLLT's nine water trail, water-access only campsites available on a first-come, first-serve basis. There are seven hiking trails that range from a one-quarter mile path to an undeveloped beach at Wabassus Lake to a three-mile loop where a 1934 fire tower can be seen but not climbed. For young families or those new to the region, the Trail to Tomorrow is under one-quarter mile and has interpretive signs about local ecology.

The opportunities available for all to enjoy might not have been if a number of "senior members for the Grand Lake Stream community" hadn't come together back in the 1990s when a 265 condomini-

um development was proposed for the stream side of Grand Lake Stream, says Brown. At the time, Wall Street was putting pressure on large landowners to change their models. Paper companies had always provided public access to their lands, but with investor pressures, those models were changing. Rather than see condominiums take over their backyard, community members "banded together, enlisted the help of larger conservation groups," such as Maine Coast Heritage Trust and also the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, and were able to purchase the proposed area. The entire strip of waterfront was preserved for access, he says. DLLT was born in 2001 and raised over \$60 million with partner organizations in order to preserve land for public access, traditional uses and recreation opportunities.

Today DLLT's goals are still focused on community. A major part of its operation is sustainable timber management. "We have a managing forester on staff, Ernest Carle. He started managing this land back in the 1970s. He works with all the subcontractors and probably knows this land better than anyone," Brown says. "All of our forestry efforts are about improving wildlife management."

Alongside its forestry management, DLLT focuses on supporting public access for traditional Maine guides and their industry. The region has several camps and lodges that attract visitors from all over the world, Brown notes. DLLT has helped to build boat launches to support the industry's success. In addition, "We have a whole permit system for the usage of the forest by local residents and camp owners." There is a free permit for craft wood where a specific tree is identified by someone for a traditional use, such as ash for Passamaquoddy basketmakers. Up to four cords of wood can be taken for personal use, and tipping permits are issued at low cost to promote the wreath industry.

In the works is a campaign to build a community center, with a section devoted to information for visitors to browse. It would be like "a rainy day space to bring kids, with information and displays," says Brown. "We're hoping to break ground this summer."

For more information visit the website www.downeastlakes.org.