

A Promised Future of Stewardship: Family and Human Legacies with the Land

Robert “Fitz” Fitzhenry, U.S. Forest Service, Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry

All photos by the author



Kyle Jones snowshoes in Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park in February 2015.

Conversation with Ecologist Kyle Jones about forest management at [Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park](#) comes easy, submerging into topics at any depth and surfacing to link or change course to the next one. There’s the big-picture story that mixes the traditions, legacy, legislation, and legalities of how this park in Vermont became the only National Park site with forest management in its mission. There’s finer detail, too, about family histories, stand inventories, beginning work with consulting forester Ben Machin, and about logging with horses to offer visitors a memorable experience.

It’s a clear, cold day in February 2015 with 30 or more inches of snow settled on the fields, carriage paths, and woods of the park. Six years have passed since the first Federal harvest here, and it will be a year until the next. It’s been 130 years since the Billings family made stewardship the mission and future of this property by

turning farmland into a plantation of Norway spruce, white and red pine, Scotch pine, European larch, and Vermont’s signature sugar maple.

Jones has described much of this in our short drive from the park headquarters to the plowed parking lot at the far west end of the property. He’s gotten his snowshoes on and I’m checking my camera bag. We’re still in conversation when Jones’ words trail off and his head swivels.

“That’s a red crossbill,” he says. “You don’t see them often but we get them here.”

Jones sights his bird right away and unpacks his binoculars, not rushed, but with no motion wasted, in a practiced, can’t-miss-this-moment way, the same way he paused our discussion. He’s looking in a tree top about 60 yards out.



A cross-country ski trail winds its way through a forest in Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park.

“There’s two of them,” he says and points to one perched and then to one flying out. I pass him my camera with the zoom lens, say “Hold on, let me switch the setting,” and take it back to put it on point-and-shoot. Jones gets six shots in with the crossbill centered in each. A longer lens and the park might have had some new art for the visitor center.

We snowshoe uphill from the parking lot toward McKenzie Road, one of the interior carriage paths at Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller. The conversation naturally segues to birds and forest management. The red crossbill likes the immediate area because the white pine seeds feed it in early winter and then the red pine into the summer. The Park Service manages for both species.

“Forestry for the Birds has been very involved here,” said Jones. The program teams Audubon Vermont, Vermont Coverts, and the National Park Service to offer guided tours of bird-friendly forest management. It’s an award-winning and replicable model for teaching and promoting stewardship.

We snowshoe east along either side of the cross-country ski tracks along McKenzie Road. The white pine stand, uphill to our south, has been thinned enough that the low, mid-morning sun over the hill shines down through to spots on the trail.

“We’re dealing with red ring rot,” said Jones. “We need to get those out and the others growing so it doesn’t all turn to pulp wood.”

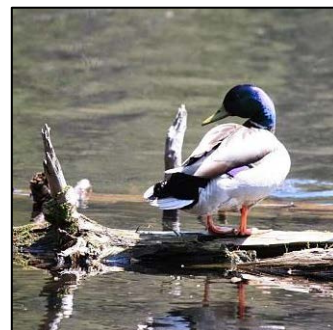
Trees in the white pine stand, and the red pine stand to the north, are well spaced, tall, and large. Jones smiles and says, “We like to grow ‘em big.”



Trees stretch to the sky in Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park.

Maybe a different treatment would yield more volume per acre, but maximizing production will never be a priority at Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller, just as it was not a priority for the park’s trinity of namesake families. The priority is more social and existential, well articulated in a quote from John Elder’s *Inheriting Mt. Tom*. The quote hangs as an epigraph that welcomes people to the visitor center:

We must conceive of stewardship not simply as one individual’s practice, but rather as the mutual and intimate relationship, extending across the generations, between a human community and its place on earth.



A male mallard perches on a log in Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park.

It's clear that Jones embraces the holistic, even missionary, purpose of the park. Human factors never seem out of his grasp either. "Our visitors and their experience here are always on our minds," says Jones. This makes sense coming from him, since his undergraduate degree is in Human Ecology, which his alma mater describes as integrating "knowledge from all academic disciplines and from personal experience to investigate, and ultimately improve, the relationships between human beings and our social and natural communities."

Snowshoeing the park west to east, we decide to head straight through to the headquarters and shuttle back to get the car we left at the start. We walk Mountain Road, stopping to talk about the horse logging that had been done and the park's promotion of the active logging days as visitor attractions.

"We can't get people safely near the machines on the big jobs, but want them to know what we're doing and why," said Jones. "Logging with horses in the summer and friendly loggers who will stop to talk with people about what they're doing and why—all of this is important, necessary, to teaching."

The big trees catch the eye. The stories of birds benefiting from forest management make an impact. Honoring the intentions of the Marsh, Billings, and Rockefeller families respects the past. All these things make indispensable, enduring impressions that teach and espouse forest stewardship.



Snow blankets tree regeneration in Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park in February 2015.