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Anonymous donor gives \$350,000 to Kestrel Land Trust to protect Mount Holyoke and Mount Tom ranges

By DEBRA SCHERBAN

@DebraScherban

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AMHERST — The Kestrel Land Trust has received \$350,000 from a Valley resident to preserve land on the Mount Holyoke and Mount Tom ranges.

The donation is the largest gift the nonprofit Amherst land trust has received from a private individual in its 43-year history, said Executive Director Kristin DeBoer.

The benefactor wishes to remain anonymous, DeBoer said, adding that the woman was inspired to make the contribution by the trust's work in the 19-town area surrounding Amherst and Northampton that it serves. "I have tremendous confidence in Kestrel Land Trust's ability to lead land conservation efforts in this beautiful region," the donor said in a statement.

The majority of the gift will be used by Kestrel to conserve land on the two ranges, working with the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, the National Park Service, which now oversees the New England National Scenic Trail that runs along the 10-mile ridgeline, the seven towns where the mountains are located and willing landowners, said DeBoer.

"We are thrilled to be the recipient of this outstanding act of generosity," she said.

As it has in the past, she said, the trust intends to leverage each dollar donated by raising five to 10 times more in grants from municipal, state, and federal conservation programs to acquire land and conservation

restrictions. She said she sees the \$350,000 donation helping to protect \$3 million worth of land.

About 10,000 acres of the 16,000-acre area have been conserved, including 7,340 acres of state parkland, said DeBoer. The trust has already begun taking steps to conserve the remaining 6,000 by mapping the land and identifying about a dozen people who own the 1,000 forest or farm acres that it hopes to protect within the next year, she said.

"We're thinking big to stretch to do 1,000 acres in one year," she said, "That's our goal. We hope to be able keep up that pace over the next several years and eventually succeed in protecting most of the 6,000 acres." DeBoer said ultimately about 100 landowners would be involved.

She noted, however, that no one will be pressured to participate.

"Land conservation is about working with willing landowners so this is not forcing anyone to do anything," she said. If they choose to, she said, those landowners can sell either their property or its development rights.

Kestrel has been working with landowners, municipalities and the state to conserve land on the Mount Holyoke Range since the trust's founding in 1970.

The steep slopes of both ranges create a number of forest types, including birch, beech and hemlock on the north side and oak and hickory on the south, said DeBoer. There are also over 30 miles of trails for hiking, walking, cross-country skiing, horseback riding and hunting, she said. In addition, she said, the land has been identified as an area that can be adaptable to climate change due to its micro habitats, its topographical diversity and its east/west orientation. "It's also one of the most scenic landscapes in Massachusetts," she said.

The trust has begun seeking grants to add to the gift and talking to landowners, DeBoer said. "We hope to be coming back to you with another story in a few months."

The last large conservation acquisition on the range was completed in 2011, when 337-acres in Belchertown were purchased by Massachusetts DCR for \$1.4 million with funding from Massachusetts Audubon, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Trust for Public Land, Friends of the Mount Holyoke Range State Park, and Kestrel Land Trust. In September, Kestrel and the town of Amherst created the 20-acre Ricci Conservation Area at the foot of the range on Bay Road in Amherst at a cost of \$535,000.

In her statement, the recent donor said she hopes her gift will inspire others to make land conservation a priority by investing in the Kestrel Trust. "The bucolic landscape of farmland, mountains and streams can make it appear that the Valley has already been saved," she said, "but there is still so much more to do."

Debra Scherban can be reached at dscherban@gazettenet.com.

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