

Kennebec Highlands

Rome, Vienna, Mount Vernon

Description

The Kennebec Highlands is a 5000-acre block of undeveloped land that features remote ponds, streams, rolling uplands, and several hills (*photo courtesy of the Kennebec Highlands website*). Vienna Mountain, one of the largest hills, features a large open ridge under blueberry cultivation. The remainder of the uplands are forested with early to mid-successional growth. Most of the uplands have a relatively recent history of timber harvest or other human intervention such that undisturbed natural upland settings are scarce.



Ponds in the Kennebec Highlands include McIntire Pond, Kidder Pond, and Boody Pond in the western half of the area, and the Round Pond – Beaver Pond complex in the eastern portion. The Kennebec Highlands project area borders on Watson Pond, which has camps along its east side but is otherwise undeveloped. Whittier Pond also lies along the eastern border of the project area, overlooked by French’s Mountain, a locally popular hiking spot. Long Pond, a major lake in the Belgrade Lakes chain, lies to the east.

The wetlands surrounding Beaver and Round Ponds form a good example of an Unpatterned Open Basin Fen Ecosystem. Open Basin Fens are peatlands that form along a low-gradient stream channel where drainage is impeded such that peat can accumulate, but where water

still flows into and out of the system. These fens are well distributed throughout the state; however, the Round-Beaver Ponds fen provides a good example of the smaller-size expression of this type of peatland. The peatland ecosystem is comprised of at least four vegetation types, which occur in different portions of the wetland and provide habitat diversity. The vegetation types are: Mixed Tall Sedge Fen, Sweetgale Mixed Shrub Fen, Leatherleaf Boggy Fen, and Mixed Graminoid-Shrub Marsh. In addition, the wetland is of interest because it represents the northern range limit of poison sumac (*Toxicodendron vernix*), a plant of southern affinities that is uncommon in Maine. There is also open-water

aquatic vegetation in Beaver Pond and its inlet, including Water-lily – Macrophyte Aquatic Bed vegetation and Pickerelweed – Macrophyte Aquatic Bed vegetation. These are all common vegetation types statewide, but form a high-quality mosaic here.

The uplands explored by MNAP staff were not of particular interest from a natural community standpoint. The blueberry fields (while providing lovely views) are intensively managed, and all of the forest seen was mid-successional or recently harvested, some areas cut rather hard. Small bands of mature forest remain around most of the ponds and some of the wetlands, but these forests are not extensive enough to be considered exemplary. They do, however, provide important buffer functions.

No community types or plants that are rare statewide have been found in the Kennebec Highlands area. Given sufficient time to develop, some of the upland areas could become good representative natural forests. At present, Kennebec Highlands’ primary conservation values are as undeveloped open space, undeveloped ponds, and wildlife habitat.

Rare Species and Natural Communities Summary Table

Common Name	Latin Name	EO Rank	Global Rank	State Rank
Unpatterned Open-basin Fen Ecosystem		B		S4

Other Resources Mapped by MDIFW

MDIF&W has mapped several deer yards within the area. The ponds within Kennebec Highlands have all been mapped as wading bird / waterfowl habitat.

Protection Status

The Belgrade Regional Conservation Alliance, assisted by the Kennebec Land Trust, recently closed on parcels totaling 3200 acres, and holds options on additional parcels totaling almost 1500 acres. An application to the Land for Maine’s Future Board for acquisition funds has recently been approved, and the land trust is in the process of raising the remaining \$200,000 in matching funds.

Conservation Considerations

Buffers should be maintained around all wetlands and ponds. While different species can have different buffering requirements, wider buffers provide better protection for riparian and wetland-dependent species. The state minimum shoreland zoning standards specify a minimum 75’ buffer in which very little harvest or clearing is allowed, with less stringent restrictions within 250’ of the wetland border. Better protection will be afforded to the wetlands and ponds if as little alteration as possible occurs within 250’ of the wetland/upland border. Any timber harvesting within and adjacent to wetlands or adjacent to ponds should be

implemented with strict adherence to Shoreland Zoning guidelines and Maine Forest Service Best Management Practices.

Conservation planning for upland features should include setting some areas aside from timber harvests to allow for the development of some unmanaged forests.

Existing roads and trails should be reviewed with particular recreation and access needs in mind, and trails closed if they run counter to protection needs. One of the prime values of Kennebec Highlands is the comparative lack of permanent roads (although the new logging road through the center of the property approaches a permanent road in size), and fragmenting features should be minimized where possible.