

## **Ecological Aspects of The Mt. Blue/Tumbledown Project** by Pamela Prodan October 2001

Everyone is familiar with the fact that Tumbledown/Mt. Blue region is a top-rate recreational area. Tumbledown Mountain, all of which is privately owned, even appears on the web site of the Maine Office of Tourism, alongside the great publicly-owned hiking destinations of Maine, including Acadia, Baxter State Park, Grafton Notch State Park, Camden Hills State Park and Bigelow Preserve. In addition to protecting traditional day hiking opportunities, the land acquisitions proposed by the Tumbledown Conservation Alliance would make a valuable contribution to safeguarding the state's natural heritage. I will outline some of the lesser-known but equally impressive natural resource features found on some of the project area lands.

**Intact and Unfragmented Forest:** According to the Maine Natural Areas Program (MNAP), which conducted a limited ecological assessment of the project area last year, the project area is within two large blocks of contiguous forest communities that are representative of separate ecological regions of Maine. One 60,000± acre block, including the project area's Pope and Hurricane Mountains, is the largest block within the Western Foothills ecological region that is unfragmented by roads and development. The other 80,000± acre block lies within the Mahoosuc/Rangeley Lakes ecological region and includes the popular recreational trails on Tumbledown, Little Jackson, and Blueberry Mountains. The proposed addition of 3,360± acres in fee ownership to Mt. Blue State Park will make it the largest park in the State's park system at nearly 8,400 acres. An additional 4310± acres immediately adjacent to the State Park will be conveyed to a Maine-based, certified forest products company. This land will be protected with conservation easements that will prevent development and division of the land while insuring traditional public access. Several miles on both sides of East Brook, West Brook, Tumbledown Brook and other perennial streams are found in the project area and will be purchased in fee or protected by conservation easements. Unfragmented forestlands and riparian zones provide significant habitat for forest interior dependent wildlife species.

**Important Natural Communities and Plants:** The MNAP has detailed the important natural resources found on some of the project area lands adjacent to Mt. Blue State Park. The Hedgehog Hill area, located to the south of the park, includes an unusually alkaline 25-acre Mixed Graminoid Shrub Marsh, a 180-acre deer wintering yard, as well as wading bird and waterfowl habitat along Fran Brook. Some of these lands and parts of Mt. Blue State Park have been proposed as a potential ecological reserve. The Pope Mountain area, north of the Park, contains remnant stands of mature red spruce and a Spruce-Fir-Broom-moss forest.

Tumbledown and Little Jackson Mountains include exemplary natural communities, including acidic summit, alpine ridge, krumholz, prominent cliffs, talus and acidic cliff communities and high elevation ponds. The mountain range is home to long-tailed shrew and spring salamander. The slopes of Tumbledown also host a population of the State listed rare plant species, Silvervine (*Paronychia auryrocoma*) and the MNAP has documented two other species of Special Concern, Appalachian fir-

clubmoss (*Huperzia Appalachiana*) and Northern meadow-sweet (*Spiraea Septentrionalis*) in the Tumbledown area.

**Bicknell's Thrush and Peregrine Falcon:** According to biologists with the Vermont Institute of Natural Science (VINS), which is monitoring the Northeast's high-elevation songbirds, the Tumbledown/Little Jackson range includes habitat for Bicknell's Thrush that is significant for a number of reasons. VINS' Bicknell's Thrush habitat model shows the conifer-dominated forest above 2,820' elevation in the Tumbledown/Jackson range to be potentially suitable Bicknell's Thrush habitat. That amounts to 215 ha (or 530 acres), about 90% of which is in the Little Jackson/Jackson Mountain crescent. While 215 ha represents only about 1% of Maine's potential Bicknell's Thrush habitat, there are two strong arguments for its significance. First, this is big enough to support multiple breeders on an annual basis and second, it is a major component of the archipelago of high-elevation conifer forest that links the Mahoosucs with the Saddleback/Abraham region. Blueberry Mountain, also in this range, is a smaller, isolated peak that is likely to support occasional breeders. It is also significant that Maine Bicknell's Thrush habitat is underconserved, compared to New York, Vermont, and New Hampshire, where the Catskill Forest Preserve, The Adirondack Forest Preserve, and the Green and White Mountain National Forests offer a relatively high level of protection. The majority of Bicknell's Thrush habitat in Maine is on private land that is not managed for conservation values. Therefore, it is important to take advantage of this rare opportunity Maine has to transfer high-elevation forest to conservation-oriented stewardship.

The state endangered Peregrine Falcon has been associated since the late 1980s with Tumbledown Mountain, which was used as a hacking site in 1987 and 1988. The Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife has documented eleven years of residency on the mountain, with eight years of pair residency. Three nesting attempts have been successful and a total of five young birds have fledged. The last year that a pair is known to have occupied the mountain is 1998. Tumbledown is one of only thirteen documented nesting sites in Maine and one of only nine that have successfully fledged young. Thus, the mountain is important in light of the falcon's small population size, limited habitat and distribution.