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**Department of
Environmental
Conservation**

SIAMESE PONDS WILDERNESS AND JESSUP RIVER WILD FOREST

Draft Amendments

to the

2005 Siamese Ponds Wilderness Unit Management Plan

and the

2006 Jessup River Wild Forest Unit Management Plan



NYS DEC, REGION 5, DIVISION OF LANDS AND FORESTS

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Introduction

The Siamese Ponds Wilderness is located in the towns of Johnsburg and Thurman in Warren County and the towns of Wells, Lake Pleasant and Indian Lake in Hamilton County. The unit is approximately 114,000 acres in size. A Unit Management Plan (UMP) for this area was completed in 2005.

The Jessup River Wild Forest is located in the towns of Arietta, Wells, Indian Lake, and Lake Pleasant in Hamilton County. The unit is 47,300 acres in size. A UMP for the area was completed in 2006. The UMP was amended in 2010 to configure the snowmobile trail system, and again in 2015 to allow public motor vehicle access across the unit to a public parking area on adjacent private lands.

In the last two years, the Department and its partners have completed three major regional trail planning efforts:

- North Country National Scenic Trail – Adirondack Park Trail Plan (NCNST), 2015;
- Conceptual Plan for a Hut-to-Hut Destination-based Trail System for the Five Towns of Long Lake, Newcomb, Indian Lake, Minerva, and North Hudson (Hut-to-Hut), 2015; and
- Great South Woods Complex Planning Strategy and Recommendations (Great South Woods), 2016.

These UMP Amendments contain seven proposals, including efforts to implement the NCNST, Great South Woods and Hut-to-Hut plans, other proposals intended to improve the hiking and camping experience, and an important wildlife protection measure:

- 1) Installation of a gate at the entrance of Eagle Cave to protect an important bat hibernaculum;
- 2) Construction of the new Wakely Brook Trail to connect the Kunjamuk Trail with the Round Pond Trail;
- 3) Official designation and marking of the Round Pond Trail, the Kings Flow East Trail, and the Puffer Pond Brook Trail;
- 4) Retention of the Puffer Pond lean-to, which was identified for removal in the 2005 UMP;
- 5) Construction of a new trail segment connecting the John Pond - Clear Pond Loop Trail to Parkerville Road;
- 6) Re-routing of a portion of the Botheration Pond Trail; and
- 7) Re-routing of a portion of the Clear Pond Trail.

Management Proposals

1. Eagle Cave Bat Hibernaculum Protection

Background:

Chimney Mountain and the associated caves (see location map, Figure 1) located in the Town of Indian Lake have become a popular destination for recreationists over the years. A short hike from the edge of the unit provides access to Chimney Mountain, interesting geologic formations and wonderful views.

One of the geologic features that has caught the interest of the recreational caving community is Eagle Cave. Eagle Cave, located near the top of Chimney Mountain, appears to be accessed by multiple points and the cave itself consists of a number of “rooms” or “openings”, some large in size which work their way down into the earth. The cave is vast and it is not uncommon for groups of recreational cavers to spend hours below the surface exploring. As with many caves, Eagle Cave is not for the novice and several rescues have taken place here over the years. The recreational caving community has traditionally accessed this cave during all times of the year.

White-nose syndrome (WNS) was first identified in a cave in Schoharie County, New York in February 2006, shortly after the Siamese Ponds Wilderness Unit Management Plan was completed. WNS has been afflicting hibernating bats in New York and across the northeast and beyond. The cold-loving fungus which causes this disease, *Pseudogymnoascus destructans*, grows best between 0-10 degrees Celsius, the same temperature found in bat hibernacula. Since its discovery in 2006, roughly 6 million bats have died within the affected regions and the disease has spread to caves and mines as far away as Alabama, Oklahoma and Canada. In 2016, the disease was documented in Washington State, representing a large jump to the west. In New York, all six hibernating bat species and all hibernacula are now infected. The little brown bat, the northern long-eared bat, and the tri-colored bat have been particularly hard hit. In some hibernacula, 90 to 100 percent of bats have died (primarily little brown bats).

WNS infection causes bats to rouse frequently from hibernation and starve to death because it induces abnormal activity at a time when there are no food resources available. The symptoms associated with WNS include loss of body fat, unusual winter behavior (including flying and congregating at hibernacula entrances), scarring, erosion and holing of the wing membranes, and usually death. Human disturbance of hibernating bats can exacerbate these effects by causing the bats to rouse unnecessarily, increasing the calories they use and accelerating their subsequent metabolic decline.

Current Conditions:

Eagle Cave is now the second largest hibernation site for little brown bats known in the Adirondacks, the third largest in the state, and one of the largest remaining in the Northeast United States. The peak in little brown bat numbers came in 2013 at just over 4500 individuals. The Department annually surveys known bat hibernacula. Recent counts have shown a slightly different picture indicating variability in the trend, though the count is still relatively stable when compared to many other sites in NY. In 2015, only 2788 bats were counted, which was a considerable decline from previous years. However, in 2016 counts were back up to over 3300. This is still a 26% decline from the 2013 high, but an increase from the pre-WNS count in 1985 of approx. 2650 bats.

The Department has also documented northern long-eared bats (federally- and state-listed as threatened) and tri-colored bats (which are being petitioned to be added to the Endangered Species Act and will likely be listed on the state level in the near future) at Eagle Cave.

The Siamese Ponds Wilderness Unit Management Plan was written before the discovery of WNS, and well before the tremendous devastation the disease would wreak on native bats. Thus, public use of the caves within the unit was not deemed to be a threat to bat populations at the time. However, public use of the caves when hibernating bats are present is now recognized as a significant threat to those species. Laboratory and field studies have shown quite clearly that human visitation causes significant disturbance of hibernating bats, exacerbating the effects of WNS. It is virtually impossible to visit the cave when bats are there without disturbing them, no matter how careful visitors are. The only effective approach is to stay out of the cave during the hibernation period. Beyond just the unintentional disturbance that human presence causes, the bats are very vulnerable to intentional vandalism. While this prospect seems unlikely given the relative remoteness of the site, it cannot be ignored, and vandals have been known to deliberately kill hundreds of bats in other caves. Such an act at Eagle Cave could have severe population-level impacts to New York's little brown bat resource.

In order to minimize human disturbance to hibernating bats, the Department began administratively closing Eagle Cave in 2009. The cave is currently closed between October 15 and April 30. Public notification efforts have consisted of posting signs at the cave entrance, parking lot kiosk and trail register, posting the information on the DEC website, and reaching out to the caving and geo-caching communities.

However, data following implementation of the closure indicate the cave still receives public use during the bat's hibernation period. To help quantify the level of public use, the Department installed a light sensor in the cave in the summer of 2012 and retrieved it the following summer. While the sensor malfunctioned prior to its removal, it did document at least 10 trips into the cave between the months of October and January.

It is evident that efforts to keep people out of Eagle Cave during the winter months have not been completely effective. While the signage, outreach and website postings have educated a majority of people, who have subsequently not entered the cave during winter, there are still some who are entering Eagle Cave during periods they should not. Thus, the Department has not adequately adhered to the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan (APSLMP) mandate that its Unit Management Plans address “the preservation and management of the fish and wildlife resources (including game and non-game species) of the area”.

Management Action:

This amendment proposes to bring the Siamese Ponds Wilderness Unit Management Plan into compliance with the APSLMP by constructing gates on the entrances to, or perhaps within, Eagle Cave to prevent human disturbance to bats during their hibernation period. This proposal is consistent with the unifying theme of the APSLMP, which states “the protection and preservation of the natural resources of the state lands within the Park must be paramount”. Furthermore, the APSLMP indicates temporary closure of all or portions of wilderness areas to permit rehabilitative measures may be appropriate if recreational use threatens a wilderness resource. Similarly, the APSLMP allows for wildlife management structures on a temporary basis when essential for the preservation of wilderness wildlife values and resources.

Iron gating, similar to what has been installed on other caves across the country and in the Adirondacks (Figure 2), will allow the department to exclude human activity while allowing bats and other small animals to enter and exit the cave, and permit the continued natural flow of air. The gates will be designed in accordance with Bat Conservation International guidelines, and will incorporate a door that can be closed and locked at the end of the bat’s active season and opened again when the bats have finished hibernation. This will allow for continued public use of the cave when hibernating bats are not present. Gates will be installed at all entrances to Eagle Cave as they are identified, or placed within the cave itself at a spot(s) beyond where multiple entrances empty into the cave system. The gate(s) will be placed in such a way to be visually unobtrusive to the greatest extent possible and designed and constructed to be tamper resistant. The cave will be surveyed periodically to assess that status of its bat population. If and when little brown bats and other hibernating bat species recover in the Adirondack Park and New York to the point that potential human disturbance is no longer a significant population threat, the gate(s) will be removed.

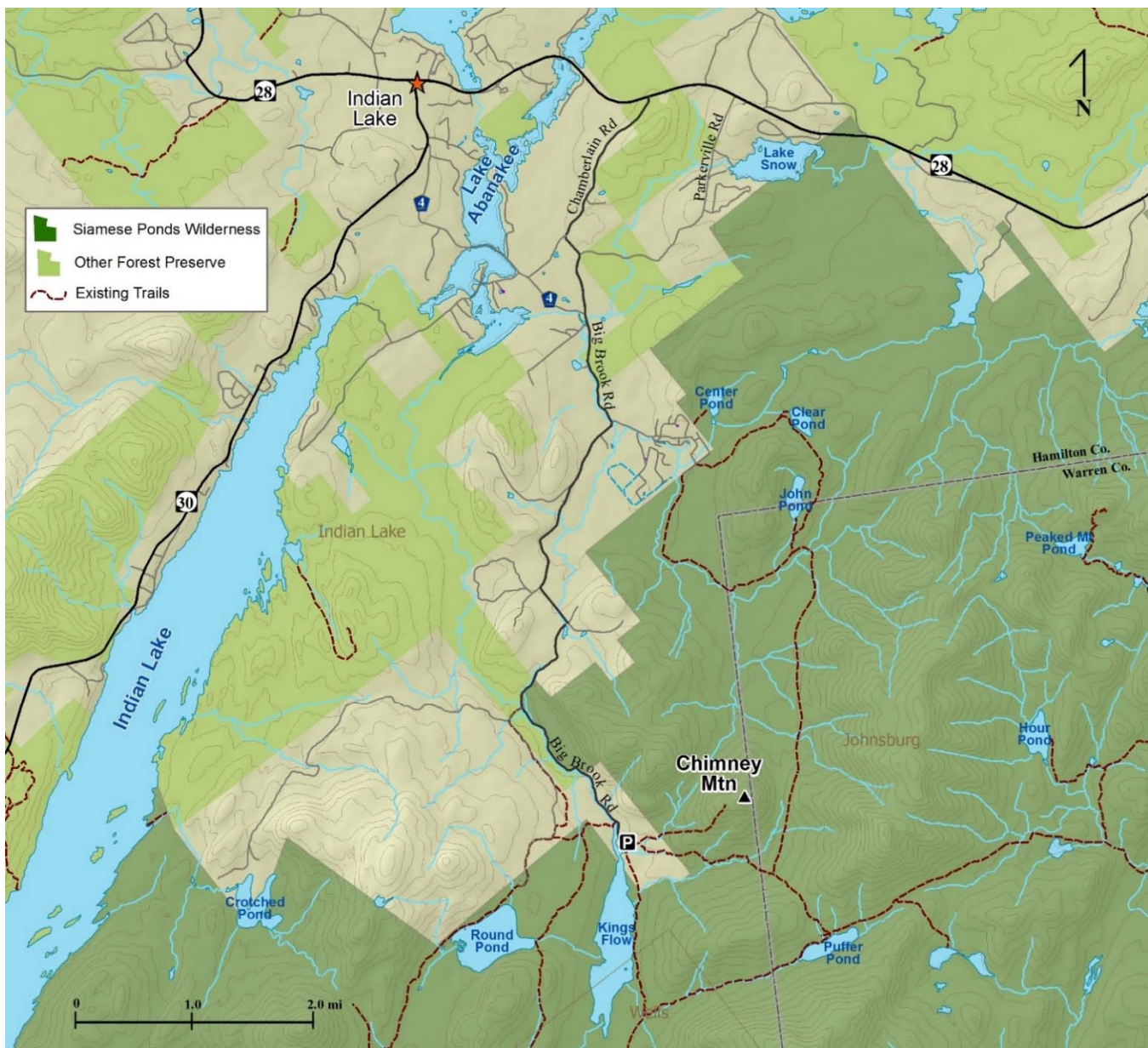


Figure 1. Chimney Mountain location map.



Figure 2. Example gated bat hibernaculum – a graphite mine entrance in Hague, Warren County.

2. Wakely Brook Trail / North Country National Scenic Trail Development

The Department proposes to construct a trail between 1 ½ and two miles in length connecting the Kunjamuk Trail with the Round Pond Trail along Wakely Brook. This trail connection would complete a 24 mile east to west stretch of existing trails that would allow the public to traverse the entire unit from the Ski Bowl in North Creek to the shores of Indian Lake. This segment is proposed to be a section of the NCNST through the Siamese Ponds Wilderness (see Figure 3.) The majority of the NCNST route through the Wilderness Area would rely on existing trails. The only gap is between the Kunjamuk Trail and the Round Pond Trail, where the NCNST Plan proposes this new connecting trail segment. This proposal also meets an objective of the Great South Woods plan. After conducting preliminary field work, Department staff have confirmed that a suitable trail could be located in this area.

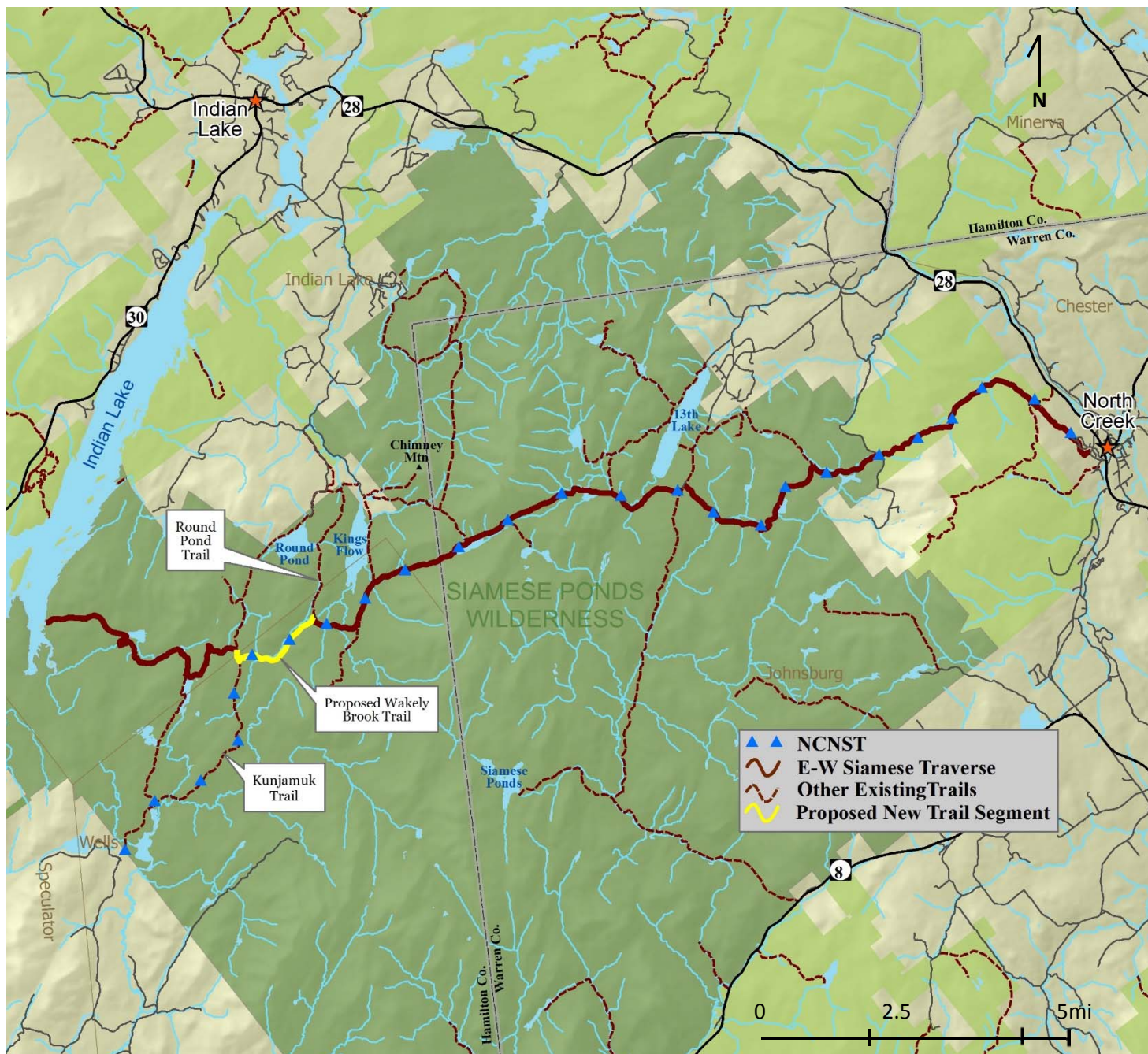


Figure 3. Proposed Wakely Brook Trail in Siamese Ponds Wilderness

3. *Un-marked to Marked Trails*

The Department proposes to officially designate and mark the Round Pond Trail, the Kings Flow East Trail, and the Puffer Pond Brook Trail (see figure 4). These trails are currently listed as unmarked in the Unit Management Plan, however they are well established on the ground and there is significant use by the public from the Chimney Mountain Trailhead. In order to make the trail system more clear in this area and in turn more safe, the Department is proposing to change the status of these trails to “marked” and maintain, sign and mark them in accordance with Department foot trail marking and maintenance guidance. Marking of the Round Pond Trail beyond Round Pond Brook is contingent on securing the rights to cross the Crotched Pond Conservation Easement to connect with the Kunjamuk Trail. Therefore, that section of the Round Pond Trail north of the brook will not be marked until that agreement is made.

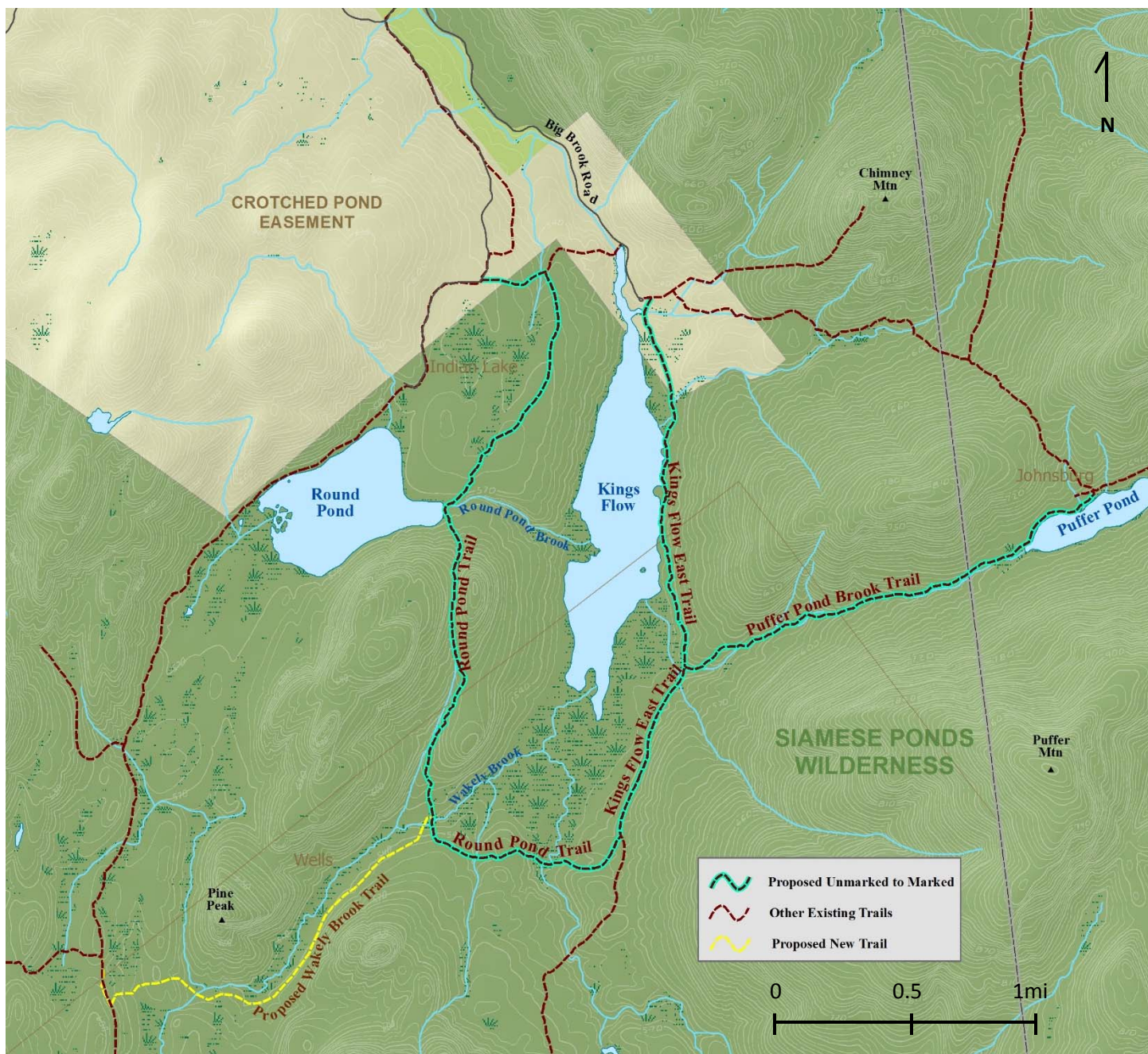


Figure 4. Unmarked trails proposed to be marked

4. Retain Eastern Puffer Pond Lean-to

The Siamese Ponds Wilderness Unit Management Plan called for the eventual removal of the Puffer Pond lean-to on the eastern end of the pond. This location is a popular destination and while the UMP indicates siting and use issues, it has since been determined that if there were issues years ago, they are not apparent now. The location is desirable by many according to lean-to logs and user feedback and with the NCNST designation along the Puffer Pond Trails, maintaining both shelters would be beneficial for managing the additional use at the pond. Therefore the Department proposes to keep both lean-tos on Puffer Pond (see Figure 5). Repairs are needed and at the time those repairs are made, the eastern lean-to would be moved back and sited a minimum of 100 feet from mean high water mark.

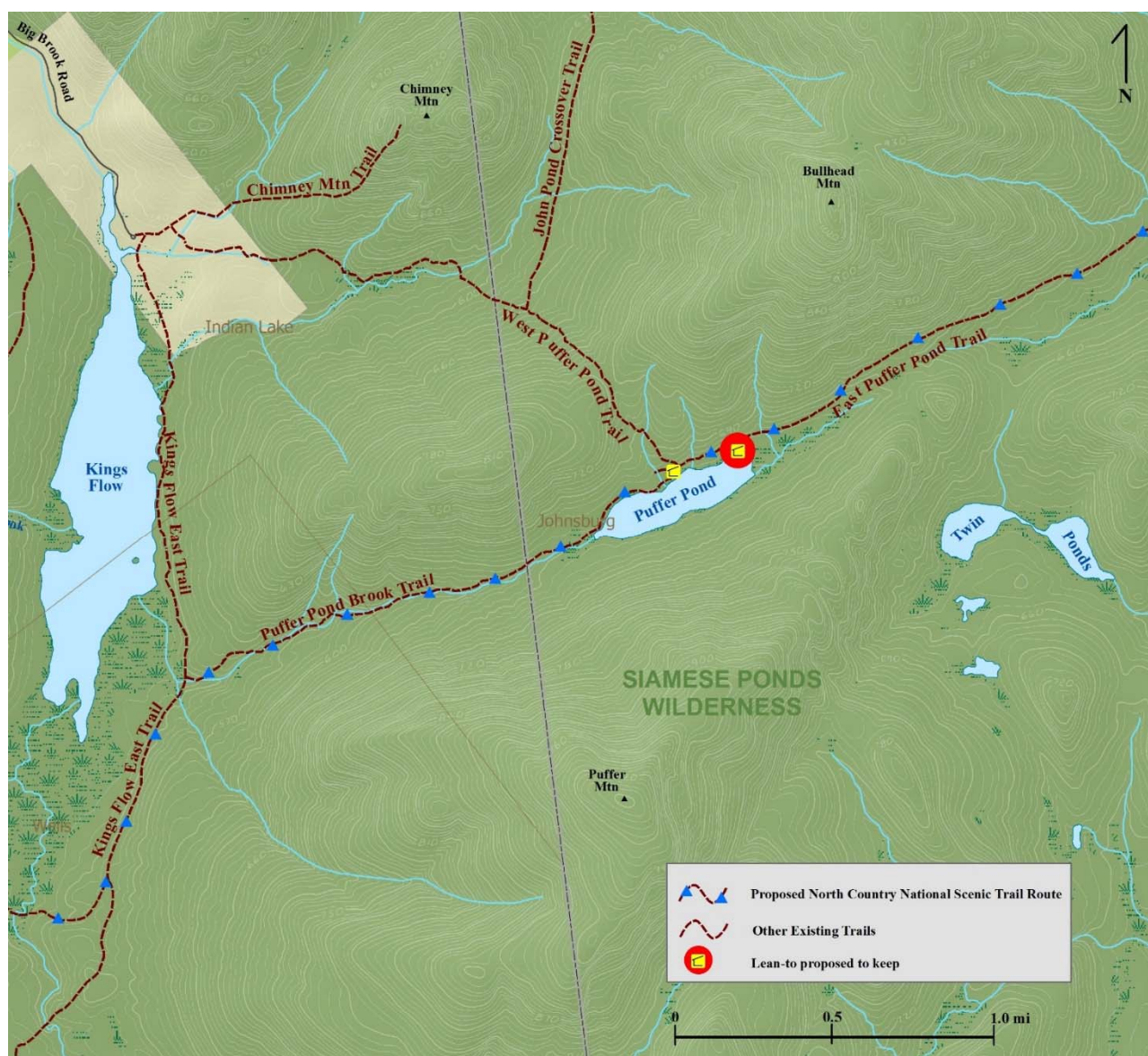


Figure 5. Lean-to proposed to be retained

5. Hut to Hut Trail Connection to Indian Lake

The Department proposes a new section of trail connecting with town roads leading to Indian Lake as proposed in the Hut-to-Hut plan. This section of trail would go from the John Pond - Clear Pond Loop Trail running northerly through Siamese Wilderness Area (approx. 1.6 miles) and an adjacent Jessup River Wild Forest parcel (approx. 1.0 mile) out to Parkerville Road in the Town of Indian Lake. Figure 6 shows a corridor of opportunity. Figure 7 shows the overview of connections to the communities of Indian Lake, North Creek and Speculator through Siamese Ponds Wilderness Area.

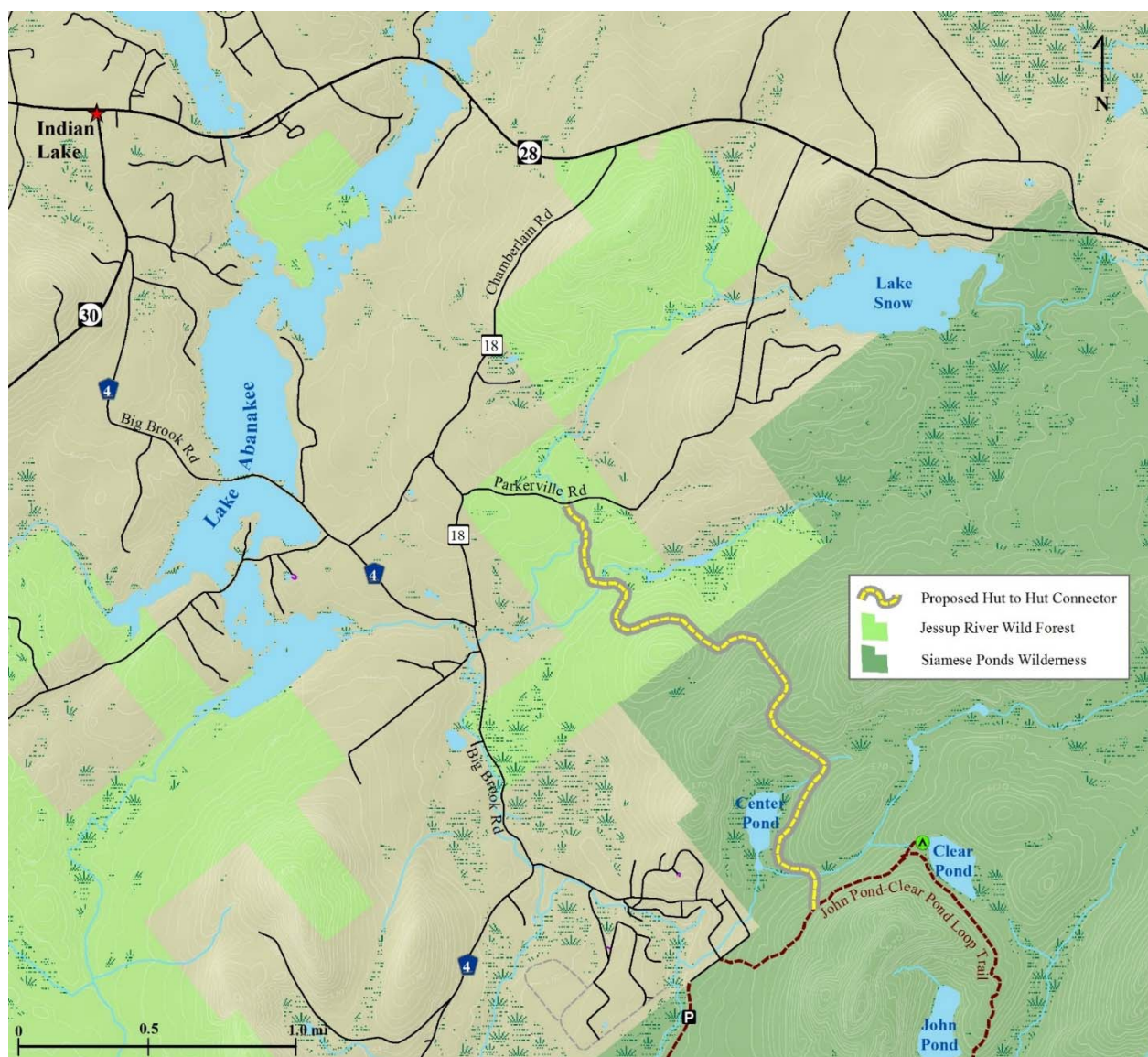


Figure 6. Hut to hut connector trail

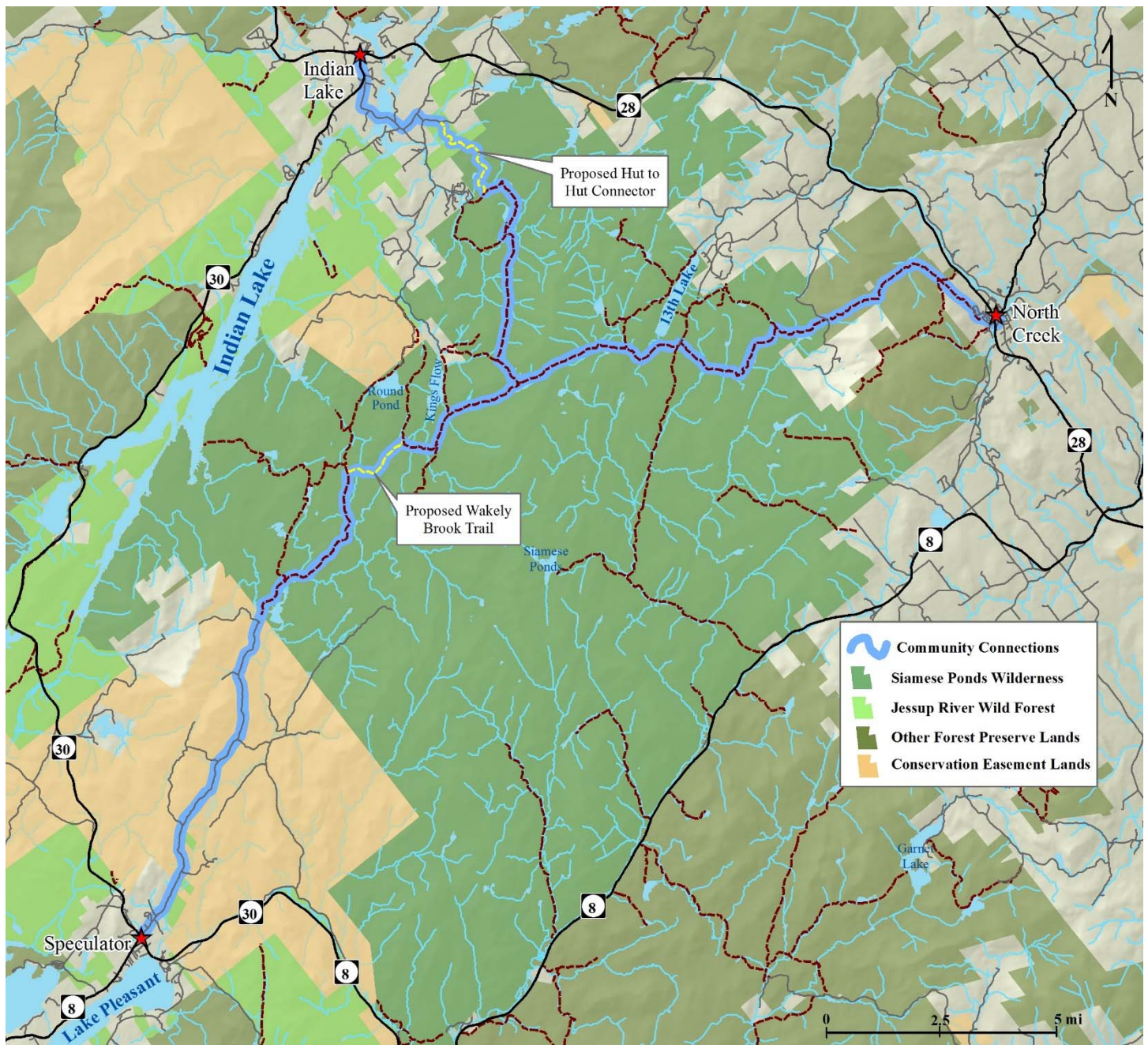


Figure 7. Siamese Wilderness Area community connections

6. *Botheration Pond Trail Re-Route*

In the Siamese Ponds Wilderness, on the Botheration Pond Trail, the 55 foot bridge over the Sacandaga River has fallen down. The Department proposes to either replace the bridge or re-route the trail to avoid this river crossing entirely (see Figure 8). The re-route would stay on the northern side of the river and rejoin the trail approximately one mile beyond the current bridge location.

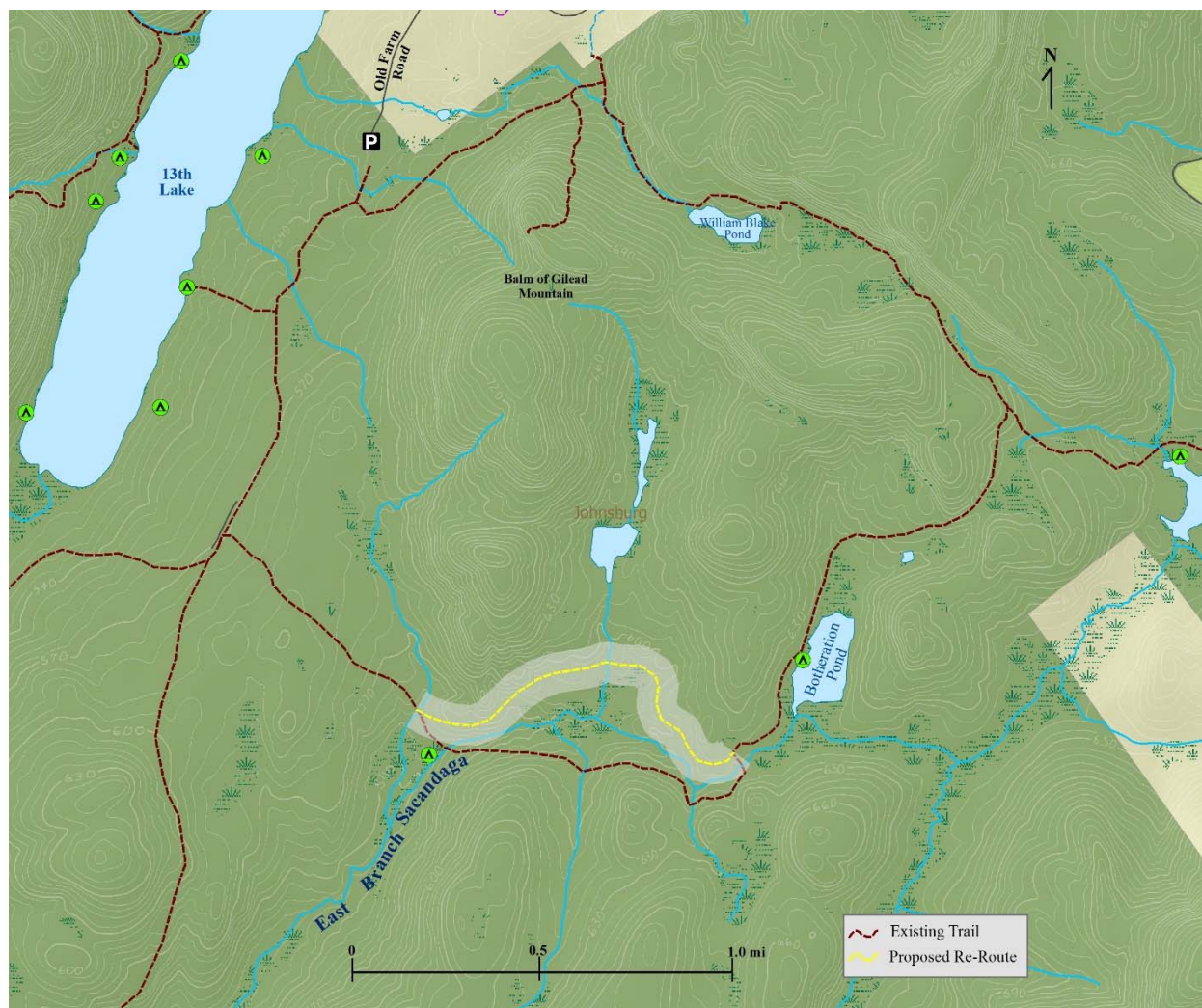


Figure 8. Approximate location of Botheration Pond Trail re-route

7. Clear Pond Trail Re-Route

In Siamese Ponds Wilderness, the Clear Pond Trail, now part of the Clear Pond-John Pond Loop, requires a short re-route to move the trail off the fall line, reduce the grade and make the full loop more optimal for skiing. The re-route would be up to 0.75 miles in length.

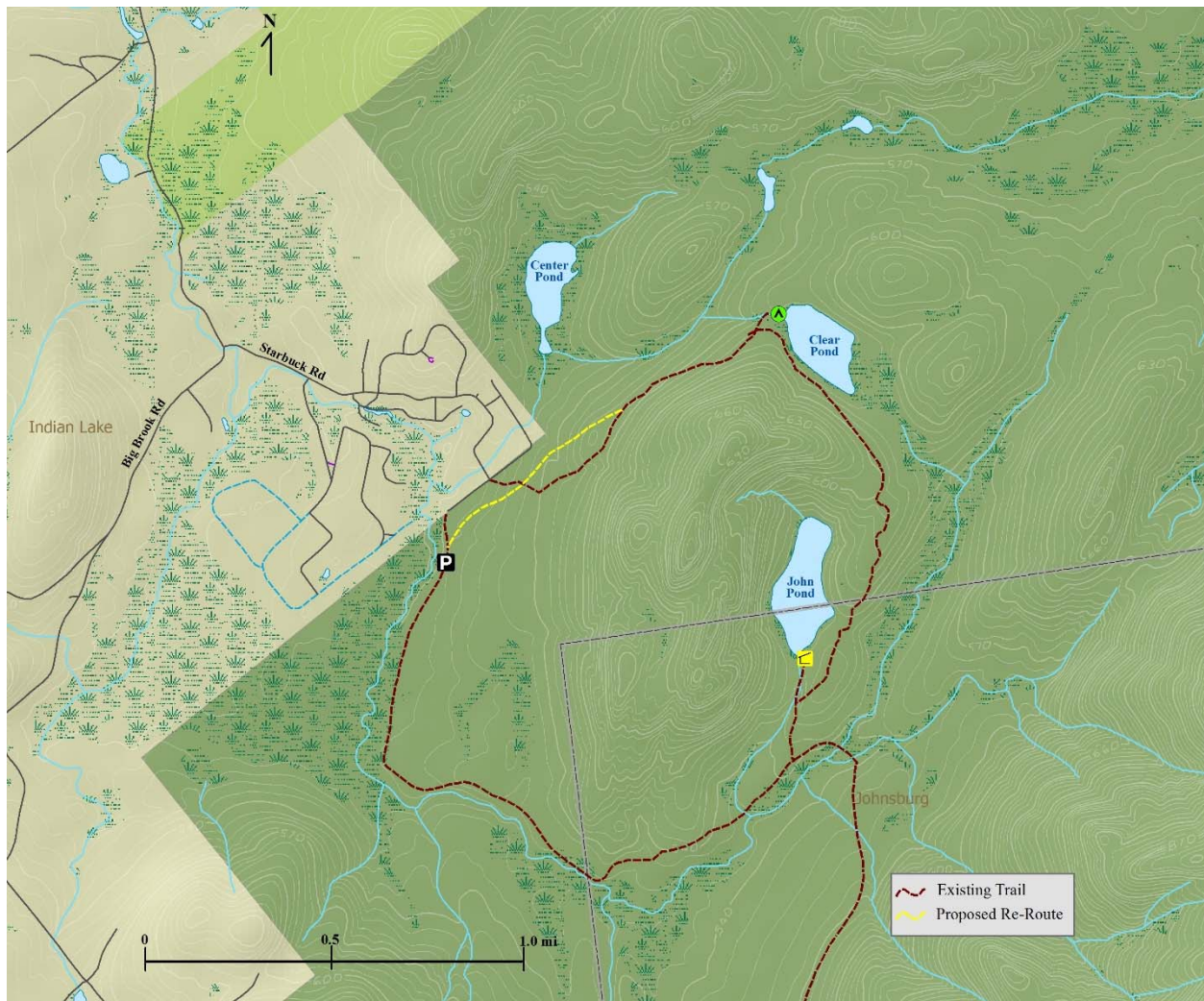


Figure 9. Approximate location of Clear Pond Trail re-route