

Field Trip 101: You CAN Lead a Guided Walk

A step-by-step guide to hosting the perfect field walk



Artwork: Linda Isaacson

The purpose of this guide is for you to plan your own field tour or walk. Your audience may vary – community members, club members, neighbors, colleagues, or family members – but the process is the same. The terms tour and walk are used interchangeably.

There are several related topics *not* covered in this guide: designing self-guided demonstration trails, working with schools, or connect with the tourist crowd. These are all great ways to reach out about wildlife and habitats to the community at large, and I encourage you to try them, but they are beyond the scope of this guide.

The guide is in chronological order, with checklists of what you should do over time: 1-2 months in advance of your walk, then 1 month in advance, several weeks, and so on including after your walk is over.

Earlier versions of this guide were produced by UNH Cooperative Extension’s Karen Bennett (“Guide to the Perfect Tree Farm Tour”) and by Gigi Laberge and Sarah Smith (“Guide to the Perfect Sawmill Tour. The current version was adapted by Malin Ely Clyde and Emma Carcagno of UNH Cooperative Extension for “Speaking for Wildlife,” a program that brings free, volunteer-led presentations and walks to New Hampshire communities.



What to Do 1-2 Months in Advance

Make a commitment to host a *Speaking for Wildlife* field walk

Do something that feels comfortable to you. Start with a group or a site that you already know.

Contact your County Extension Forester to schedule your walk and schedule a time for them to walk the property with you ahead of time.

Make sure you have permission from the landowner to lead a walk (on either public or private land). Get that permission in writing (email is fine).

Determine your audience

Is this going to be a tour for the local school or something geared for adults? A picnic for the general public? There are many possibilities from which to choose. Deciding exactly who your target audience will be makes all the rest of the planning and scheduling easier and more productive.

Do you want to invite or encourage specific groups to attend? Who are they? Here are some examples of common audiences for guided walks:

- The general public
- Neighboring landowners
- School groups
- Clubs such as scout troops, Garden Clubs, or Rotary members
- Visitors to an existing event such as Old Home Days or a Town Picnic

If you are located in a travel destination area, consider developing a tour designed for visiting tourists. The Weeks State Park summer evening talks are an example of this. Perhaps you could combine your field tour with fairs, festivals, or tourist attractions going on in your community.

Develop a theme for your walk

Your enthusiasm and excitement is by far the most important ingredient for a successful walk, even more important than sharing knowledge and information.

Developing a **theme** for your walk allows you to share some knowledge with your audience without overwhelming them. Ask yourself some questions:

- What is special about the property you are walking?
- What is special about its value as habitat or for wildlife?

By answering these questions you are well on your way to developing a theme for your walk. Here are some examples of themes for property walks:

- *Our town forest is special because it contains critical wildlife.*
- *This property contains 6 miles of trails that are open to the public.*
- *Reptiles and amphibians are unique creatures and require special habitats to live.*
- *This property is an example of high quality habitat for xx rare species.*

When you come up with a theme for your walk, write it down. When you take visitors on your walk, start with your theme to introduce yourself and the property. Say your theme often and relate your messages and information to it. If a visitor leaves your walk understanding the message in your theme, even if they don't know about the details of wildlife ecology or habitat management, consider yourself a success.

Write Key Messages

There are probably other messages that you want to deliver on your walk. They should relate and build upon your theme.

Key messages can be delivered during a tour as you walk and talk about what people are seeing. Like your theme, they should be clear, concise, and summarized in a single sentence or two. Usually they are related to the "big picture". Sample key messages follow:

- *This walk is part of the "Speaking for Wildlife," a project coordinated by UNH Cooperative Extension and the NH Coverts Project, with support from NH Fish and Game, the NH Charitable Foundation, and the Davis Environmental Foundation.*
- *Allowable uses of these trails include walking, dogs, skiing, and snowshoeing.*
- *UNH Cooperative Extension has staff who can help landowners learn how to care for their land.*
- *You are a Coverts Volunteer. The Coverts Project is a UNH Cooperative Extension Program that trains volunteers and landowners to work on behalf of New Hampshire's wildlife.*

Develop a draft agenda

Even the most casual appearing walk should have an agenda. It should be related to why you want to lead a walk, your theme, key messages, and unique features of the property, or some special activity, such as planned habitat management work. As you think of your agenda (what will happen when) keep these tips in mind:

- Your group may consist of people with vastly different physical abilities. Most tours can provide enough information and inspiration in about 2 hours, and may cover only a mile in distance.
- Unless you know your audience (hikers, for example), **avoid covering a lot of ground or rough terrain.**
- Stay on track with your agenda. **End your walk on time** to avoid people having to depart before the end. Missing part of the walk will leave them dissatisfied, as will the feeling that things didn't go according to plan.

Select a date

Does your audience have specific dates and times they would prefer? Consider the time of the year.

Some dates and times of year may garner lower attendance. However, depending on your audience and your suggestions for preparedness, they may still be okay. Times you may want to avoid include:

- Holidays
- Long weekends will affect attendance, but may still have a good turnout
- Black fly season (mid-May through mid-June)
- Mud season can affect travel along dirt roads

Should you host your field tour on a weekend or a weekday? Most tours are held on weekends, but short late afternoon tours, when the days are longer, can fit into busy people's schedules.

Determine ahead of time if you will run the tour "rain or shine" and advertise it that way. Most are held regardless of the weather, but if the rain appears, be prepared for a reduced turnout and plan ahead for a place for people to get out of the weather.

Planning a field walk in conjunction with another events such as a town-wide fairs will ensure a large audience and simplify your work as advertising will be collaborative.

Prepare invitations or announcements

Unless you are organizing your walk for a specific, already-established target group (for example a garden club who has regular meetings), start organizing your field walk by letting your target audience know. Some groups (schools, for example) need lots of notice to coordinate travel arrangements and an adequate number of chaperons.

The UNH Cooperative Extension Natural Resources Field Specialist can help you get the word out too. A sample flyer is on the *Speaking for Wildlife* website. You can adapt this sample flyer with details about your event. You know what the walk will be about, so you need to be involved in developing the agenda and announcement. Personal contact by you to individuals, organizations and the press will go a long way to encouraging attendance.



What to Do 1 Month in Advance

Send out your invitations and announcements

The internet is the least expensive and easiest way to get the word out. Emails, Facebook posts, Twitter posts, and posting on a blog or town-wide e-newsletter are very effective at spreading the word with little effort.

Word of mouth, posters around town, and mailings are also effective. Two to three weeks lead time is usually adequate. Use word-of-mouth and start telling all the folks you'd like to attend what day and what time.

Send out press releases or paid advertisements regarding your special event.

For tours open to the public send press releases. A sample press release is on the *Speaking for Wildlife* website. Include directions. Don't forget where, when, who, and why details. In addition to major newspapers in your area, be sure to send your press release to the small, local papers and radio stations. Send a press release even if your event is targeted for a specific audience.

NH's major print news organizations (visit websites for submission details)

Berlin Daily Sun

Boston Globe/NH Weekly

Concord Monitor
Conway Daily Sun
Caledonia Record (Vermont)
Foster's Daily Democrat
Keene Sentinel
Portsmouth Herald
The Citizen (Laconia)
The Telegraph (Nashua)
Union Leader (State-wide)
Valley News (Lebanon)

Food

Serving food is usually a nice ice breaker. Muffins or doughnuts in the morning; cookies and an apple in the afternoon. Kids of all ages like cookies or a cheesy snack. Don't forget something to drink. Coffee or cider always hits the spot. Keep it simple.

Things to give away – Stuff

Do you plan to give visitors items? Now is the time to get them organized. You may get mementos from Extension or special handouts.

Handouts can help make a point - A few are good, but too many is overwhelming. Examples of brochures and handouts are on the *Speaking for Wildlife* website.

Restroom Plan

For most short duration walks (three hours or less) with under 50 attendees, porta-potties aren't necessary. If you are hosting a large crowd at a field site or your property, it isn't a bad idea to rent a portable restroom for your event, especially if the tour is long and you anticipate over 50 people. One porta-potty is good for 50 to 100 people. Two for 100-200.



What to Do 2 Weeks Before

Safety First

Walk your tour site through the eyes of an outsider. The Extension Field Specialist in Natural Resources in your county can help you plan your walk and identify any possible safety hazards. This could be the most important planning step you take. Use surveyors tape to clearly mark off areas that are off limits. Avoid them on the day of your walk. Carry the first aid kit and a cell phone (if you have reception!) with you on the walk, in case participants have problems.

Keep Kids Safe!

Are you used to kids? If not, have someone who is, check out the walk with the thought of identifying those areas that could be dangerous to children. Kids are quick. Lay down the rules. All children must be accompanied by an adult. Plan in advance what to do with a group of kids if they get particularly rambunctious. (See the section “Involving Children in Your Field Walk”).

Safety equipment

Your guests will need hardhats if you there is an active logging job or other heavy equipment on site. You can borrow hardhats from UNH Cooperative Extension. While some guests aren't wild about personal protective equipment, make this mandatory. With heavy equipment on site, consider setting an age limit for your tour. UNHCE often limits workshops to adults if there will be logging or chainsaw activity.

Emergency

Have a first aid kit and a plan ready. If your field walk group includes children from a school, find out in advance what their first-aid procedure is. Carry at least one copy of the UNH Cooperative Extension Accident/Injury Form (located in the *Speaking for Wildlife* kit), along with the first aid kit, just in case you or a participant experiences an injury. **Bring a cell phone if you have reception.** For large group tours you may want to give your local emergency services a just-in-case call notifying them that you are hosting a special event with lots of people.

If you are doing a walk on public lands, sometimes they will require you have a Certificate of Liability Insurance. Check ahead of time! As a UNHCE volunteer, we can provide you a copy of the University of New Hampshire certificate. Contact any UNH Extension staff for help.

Hunting Season

Regular rifle deer season always begins the second Wednesday in November and ends the first Sunday in December. This is the most important hunting season for visitors to be aware of. Even though there is safety in numbers, you should wear hunter orange or pink as an example to your visitors. If your walk is during hunting season, remind visitors on the announcement and encourage them to bring their own vest or hat.



What to Do 1 Week Before

Do a Pre-Walk

Walk the route you intend to take to check for and clean-up blowdowns and other hazards. Check your route to see that your intended topics still make sense. Watch the clock, or have someone else watch it for you. Know in advance how long it should take to complete the walk.

Signs

Make sure you have signs to direct visitors from main roads. Laminated paper signs are located in the Speaking for Wildlife kits.

Parking

Unless there is a parking lot, decide where participants will park. Notify local police if there will be a lot of cars parked along a public road.

Food

Delegate who is responsible for getting the snacks and putting them in the right location.

Maps, Nametags, Handouts

If you have helpers, make nametags for them and make sure you have your volunteer badge (or make one for yourself). If you have a map of the site, make enough copies for everyone or be able to hand around a few copies. Have enough handouts for everyone.



The Day of Your Walk

Greet folks when they come in

Welcome to the XX walk! If parking is complicated, you or a partner should direct cars to the parking area and point them in the direction of your meeting place.

Introductions

Wear a nametag so people can call you by name and know you are someone they can direct their questions. Introduce yourself (and any other leaders). Give them a little background. Tell them something about yourself that they might find interesting. Give your guests a brief story about the property they will be walking. Tell them what is special and unique.

With some groups having them introduce themselves is fun too. As a tour guide this makes your job easy. Plus it's fun to better acquaint yourself with your guests.

Before you head out, enlist your guests in making this a great tour for everybody. Remind them to gather round close to the tour guide when you stop to talk. Encourage them to ask questions when everyone is together.

Explain where people will end up and how long the tour should take. Folks like to know what to expect. Begin and end on time.

The details

Before you head out, tell them where to find the bathrooms (if there are any), and anything else they need to know.

Review tips for the tour

- Face the group when you are speaking.
- If you want to have a record of the event, take pictures (or ask someone else to).
- Stand where the whole group can see and hear you.
- Speak clearly.
- Let the participants ask questions.
- Walk at a comfortable pace.
- Don't start talking until your group has gathered around. Make sure everyone can hear you.
- Keep an eye on your guests, especially small ones.
- Stay focused.
- You can make a good presentation because you will be speaking about something you know well. Remember your audience wants you to succeed.
- If you are speaking to a group who is not familiar with wildlife or habitats, use language your audience will understand. Try to avoid slang or lingo.
- Be prepared for questions. Audience participation is a good thing.
- Don't be afraid to say "I don't know" and offer to help them get the information from another source.
- Relax, enjoy yourself and have fun!



After Your Walk

Reflect on your success

After your walk, consider writing a press release about your event, including a picture. This is especially helpful if you plan to host another event – it's a great way to advertise the next event in the context of the success of your first event.

Make some notes about what worked and what didn't, to help you in planning other walks in the future. If you know any of your audience members, ask them what aspects of the event they particularly enjoyed, and how they think you could have improved the event. Getting the perspective of audience members is invaluable.

If your event was part of the Speaking for Wildlife program, submit the online "Self-Evaluation" form to tell Extension staff how your event went – how many people attended, etc. The form is available at www.speakingforwildlife.org

Great job!