





A WALK IN THE TREES

VINS' educational mission reaches new heights with the Forest Canopy Walk

By Stephen D'Agostino | Photos courtesy of VINS

When I sat down with Charlie Rattigan, executive director of the Vermont Institute of Natural Science (VINS), to talk about the institute's forthcoming addition of a canopy walk to its campus, I mentioned that when I visit VINS, I am enthralled by the birds of prey exhibit. I said I thought the canopy walk would be a more subtle experience.

Charlie turned from his computer, which was acting as unpredictable as a wild animal, and in his characteristically soft voice said, "The canopy walk is not subtle." He promised me that after we talked, we'd visit this work in progress to prove his point.

A canopy walk is exactly what its name implies: an opportunity to stroll among the leaves and branches of trees to get an unexpected and otherwise inaccessible view of all aspects of the forest. The VINS Forest Canopy Walk is the first such experience in New England. It's a perfect fit for VINS and, in many ways, emblematic of Charlie's leadership of the organization.





The giant Spider's Web under construction.

“PEOPLE WHO ENCOUNTER SOMETHING BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND IT MORE AND UNDERSTAND ITS VALUE. THEY ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE ACTIVE IN ITS PRESERVATION AND PROTECTION.”

— CHARLIE RATTIGAN,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE VERMONT
INSTITUTE OF NATURAL SCIENCE (VINS)

EDUCATION, THE HEART OF THE VINS EXPERIENCE

VINS was founded in Woodstock in 1972. Even in its infancy, it stressed education as a way to change attitudes and maintain a healthy environment. Over its near half-century of existence, it has undergone many changes. In 1987, VINS opened its Raptor Center to care for injured birds of prey. In 2004, it moved to its current location in Quechee, a 47-acre preserve of rolling hills and meadow on the banks of the Ottauquechee River.

Over time, its mission evolved as well. Now, the nonprofit states that its goal is to motivate individuals and communities to care for the environment through education, research, and avian wildlife rehabilitation.

“We often say that we are in the business of creating the next generation of environmental stewards,” says Charlie, who became executive director in 2014. “Those are people who are aware of the natural world and have a vested interest in preserving and protecting it.” He stressed that the “next generation” isn’t just children; VINS can be a transformative experience for people of all ages.

The Quechee campus features two songbird aviaries and 17 state of the art raptor enclosures providing homes for injured eagles, hawks, owls, and other birds of prey. VINS also houses the Center for Wild Bird Rehabilitation, the Center for Education, and the Cen-

Right: Tree House and Interpretive Platform.
Below: Architect's rendering of the Forest Canopy Walk.



ter for Environmental Research, which operates an active citizen-science program.

Other educational efforts include visits to schools, summer camps for children in kindergarten through eighth grade, and outreach programs on subjects such as raptors, reptiles, owls, and even moose at community events, libraries, festivals, and fairs.

POSITIONING VINS FOR THE FUTURE

Of course, there is more to running a successful non-profit than creating and maintaining a diverse program of educational resources and exhibits. When Charlie became executive director, about 25,000 people visited VINS each year. He knew, however, that attendance needed to increase to ensure the organization's financial stability and predictability in years to come. "We needed to begin the transformation of VINS," he says.

In 2015, *Birds Are Dinosaurs* opened, the first new exhibit under his leadership. "It's really world-class science plus some wonderful, illustrative material," he says. The walk-through exhibit features life-sized replicas, videos, and renditions of some of the early ancestors of birds.



Shortly after, the *Forest Exhibit* opened—an immersive experience featuring a two-story tree that gives visitors the chance to discover the diversity of forest inhabitants. To leave the exhibit, one can walk back down the stairs to the first floor. Kids can take the slide down the inside of the tree and exit outdoors.

These exhibits have been successful in increasing attendance. The number of annual visitors now tops 38,000, a 52 percent increase in four years. But VINS was ready to climb higher.

TAKING IT TO THE TREES

Charlie first experienced a canopy walk in Costa Rica some years ago. Thinking a similar attraction would add an experiential learning opportunity to the institute's diverse educational offerings, he brought the idea to the VINS board. Together, they researched and visited canopy walks at the Holden Arboretum in Ohio, the Morris Arboretum at the University of Pennsylvania, the Wild Center in New York, and Kew Royal Botanical Gardens in London.

In these venues, the canopy walks had resulted in initial spikes in attendance, as well as sustained increases of anywhere from 30 to 200 percent. As part of its analysis, VINS set a goal of a 70 percent increase in attendance.

In 2016, convinced that the Forest Canopy Walk would be a success, VINS hired an architect, and the next year, the institute began fundraising. The cost of construction, they determined, would be \$1.7 million. When Charlie and I talked, VINS had managed to raise about 80 percent of the needed funds through donations from individuals and local businesses, grants, and naming opportunities.



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While we chatted, Charlie showed me diagrams of the walk and photos documenting its construction, building anticipation that had me ready to leap out of my seat. Finally, he stood and said, “Are you ready to take a walk?”

Leaving the VINS campus behind us, we walked into the woods on an existing path, part of the VINS trail network. An ADA-compliant ramp made it easy for us to access the Forest Canopy Walk. By the time we reached the ramp’s end, we were well above the forest floor, a feat accomplished by the natural slope of the land as it descends to the Ottauquechee River. From here, we could explore only the portion of the 900-foot walkway that had been completed. Below us and across the expanse of the structure, workers were building supports and laying down flooring. Charlie explained to me how things will look when the work is complete.

The Forest Canopy Walk is designed as a self-guided tour, inviting people to spend as long as they want among the trees. The circular walkway has five platforms where people can step off and examine the mid height of the ashes, oaks, maples, and pines that surround them. About one-quarter of the way around in a counter-clockwise direction is the Owl’s Nest, the first of three lookouts.

At this point, the terrain has dropped so much that visitors are 50 feet above the forest floor. In this same section of the walk is the Spider’s Web, a massive replica of the delicate design produced by yellow garden spiders. Children and adults are invited to crawl on the web. Suspended above the forest floor, people can get an arachnid’s-eye view of the forest below.

From the Eagle’s Nest, which is about halfway around the walkway,

visitors can see the bend of the Ottauquechee through the tall pines as it meanders by. Patient observers might see a great blue heron wading along the shore. Those with eyesight as acute as the namesake of this vantage point might spot turtles or frogs on the river's edge.

Continuing on, visitors can ascend the Tree House, which rises 100 feet above the ground. In a moment of quiet reflection, something Charlie hopes visitors will enjoy on the Forest Canopy Walk, people might hear the call of migrating warblers in the spring and fall or the rat-a-tat of woodpeckers seeking food in the surrounding trees. They might identify phoebes from their telltale call and constantly bobbing tails. Perhaps they'll see squirrels or other forest mammals scampering about far below them.

"People who encounter something begin to understand it more and understand its value," Charlie had said earlier. "They are more likely to be active in its preservation and protection." The Forest Canopy Walk provides a unique and varied opportunity to have that encounter. When we exited, I realized he was right: The experience of the Forest Canopy Walk is not subtle. But it is sublime. 

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The VINS Forest Canopy Walk is slated to open in early October. Admission to VINS (\$16.50 for adults, \$15.50 for seniors and college students with ID, \$14.50 for youth ages 4-17, and free for children under 4) includes access to the Forest Canopy Walk.



The right hands are *right here.*

(From left) **Gastroenterology:** Chelsea Curran, NP. **General Surgery:** Catherine A. Schneider, MD, Brent White, MD. **Pain Medicine:** Kim Youngren, MD. **Podiatry:** Jeffery R. King, DPM. **Ophthalmology:** Christopher S. Connor, MD.

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