WE USE HIGHWAYS TO GO PLACES. Other animals use wildways. If your family wants to travel from Florida to Maine, say, or California to Washington—perhaps to escape summer heat—you can easily drive the distance on I-95 or I-5. A comparable journey would not be so effortless for a cougar or a wolf in search of a new homeland. To travel long distances, wide-ranging species like cougars, wolves, bison, songbirds, and salmon need protected webs of continuous habitats—or wildways.

What are Wildways?
Wildways are broad, diverse corridors functional for wildlife movement, climate adaptation, and human recreation, conserved at local, regional, and continental scales. Used daily and seasonally by animals and outdoorspeople who need room to roam, these connected habitats also accommodate range shifts by wild species adapting to climate change. Wildways are where imperiled wildlife—like jaguars, lynx, wolverines, grizzly bears, prairie dogs, eels, and salmon—can be restored, thereby rewilding landscapes diminished by people in the past.

Wildways include discrete wildlife corridors, like the Path of the Pronghorn between Wyoming’s Grand Tetons and Upper Green River Valley, or New York’s Southern Lake Champlain Valley—through which bears, fishers, and moose from Vermont’s Green Mountains can pass into the Adirondacks. But wildways also comprise core wild habitats and surrounding transitional areas that are important to both wildlife and people.

Why Wildways?
From wolves and wolverines to elk and pronghorns, from songbirds and salamanders to frogs and butterflies, all wildlife great and small must move to survive. We need to protect and connect habitats in order for wildlife and people to coexist and thrive.

A lone wolf tells the story: Two years ago, a she-wolf named Echo by Arizona schoolchildren ventured from Yellowstone to the Grand Canyon. Echo did not find other wolves in the Grand Canyon when she arrived, and started back northward again—only to be tragically shot in Utah. Yet her story gives us hope that if we protect such areas, wildlife will return.
But wildways are not just for wild things; they are essential for all of us. Humans, too, find freedom and peace of mind in big, connected landscapes. Further, the leading biologists of our time tell us that we are in the midst of an extinction crisis that threatens much of the wildlife we love and depend upon. Protecting and restoring wildways, including core wild habitats linked by wildlife corridors, is our best hope for wild species to adapt to a changing climate and guard against extinction.

Realizing the Vision
Wildlands Network has employed conservation biology to craft conservation plans for many regions, showing how wildways can be pieced back together over time. Protecting wildways requires the cooperation of wildlife agencies and land managers, elected government officials, outdoor recreationists, private landowners, conservation groups, and all of us who care about conserving our countries’ great natural heritage.

Wildways vary by region, but will typically require the continued protection of wilderness areas and national parks, the science-based management of multiple use areas like our national forests and wildlife refuges, carefully stewarded private lands, and economically diverse human communities. Strong financial incentives for the stewardship of private lands will be essential to the creation of all major wildways, especially in the eastern US, southeastern Canada, and throughout Mexico. Land trusts and conservation easements will also play central roles. Where roads fragment key habitat linkages, safe wildlife crossings (i.e., underpasses and overpasses) will need to be constructed, allowing animals to freely move between their natural habitats.

Wildways are Critical for Wildlife and People
Consider how wildways can enrich our world. If we protect continental wildways through the Southeast Coastal Plain and Appalachian Mountains, and across the Upper Great Lakes region, cougars will potentially make their way north from remnant strongholds in southern Florida and east from their reclaimed outpost in South Dakota’s Black Hills. Cougars help to restore forest health by limiting over-browsing by deer and feral hogs. Trout, salmon, eels, shad and other migratory fishes will return to streams freed of manmade dams. Meanwhile, elk, bison, and other missing wildlife can also be reintroduced. More balanced ecosystems mean fewer carriers of ticks, which means less chance of Lyme disease for the millions of people who love to hike, birdwatch, hunt, and fish.

A Western Wildway (right), stretching from northern Mexico’s Sierra Madre to Alaska’s Brooks Range along the Rocky Mountain “Spine of the Continent,” will help wolves reclaim their role as apex carnivores in forests now over-browsed by elk and deer. As shown in the remarkable Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, wolf recovery rejuvenates rivers and riparian areas to the benefit of beavers and frogs, trout and anglers, songbirds and birders, butterflies and flowers—and ultimately elk and deer themselves. Similarly, a Pacific Wildway could restore wolves, wolverines, salmon, sea otters, orcas, and towering redwoods. We can also work together to protect and restore wildways across the Boreal Forest, through the Great Plains, and along our waterways—the arteries of the land.

Protecting wildways will result in more resilient communities. Like the ecological impact of returning wolves to Yellowstone, restoring and protecting wildways will have cascading effects; protected lands have the proven economic benefits of increasing tourism and attracting and retaining entrepreneurs, businesses, and retirees. Let’s restore these safe passages for our wild neighbors and ourselves.