



# Meet Alden Smith

New Director of the Vermont  
Institute of Natural Science

By Dean Whitlock

Photography by Lynn Bohannon

When Tennessee native Alden Smith graduated from Davidson College, he took an unexpected journey north. “Unexpected” because he planned to return south after a few years. Instead, he discovered a rewarding career, fell in love with Vermont, and now, three decades later, has become the new executive director of VINS, the Vermont Institute of Natural Science, in Quechee.

## WHY VINS?

Alden studied literature in college, but nature has always been his passion. His first job was a five-year teaching stint in Connecticut, where “I was inspired to teach outdoors whenever possible.” That led him to the Mountain School in Vershire, Vermont, where he spent the next 23 years as both teacher and school director.

At the Mountain School, Alden and his family (wife Missy, daughter Ellicott, and sons Alden and Henry Atticus) lived in a



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To illustrate, he describes the VINS Owl Festival, which took place only two weeks after he became executive director. About 2,400 people attended, including exhibitors from several partner NPOs from around New England. He met people who were new to VINS and people who regularly attend, all of them delighted by the event.

“What knocked me over,” Alden says, “was the commitment of the volunteers. There were so many of them, so skilled, obviously filled with a love of the place. I was also struck by the devotion and

expertise of the staff. How they balance the public-facing work of teaching and presenting with their largely invisible devotion behind the scenes—the thousands of hours rehabilitating and training the raptors, the ongoing research, and the development of community partnerships—so a sensational program like Owl Festival can happen.”

#### WHAT'S AHEAD?

Alden brings an educator's lens to VINS, so one focus will be the growing demand from local schools for educational programs that focus on the natural world. Currently, VINS isn't able to meet all

house with several students. It was a 24/7 job involving every aspect of the school, from fundraising to the forestry program. Alden found it very fulfilling, but as his children approached high school age, he decided to take a year off to write, consult, and focus on family while looking for “the right next thing.” It was hard to be patient, he says, and to accept that a career opportunity could pull them away from the Upper Valley, which his family loves. But patience paid off.

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Alden Smith at the entrance to VINS, Route 4 in Quechee.



Alden Smith along the Canopy Walk, built in 2019.

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that demand, making this a good time to take a closer look at existing programs to see how they could be more strategic and perhaps go even deeper into the topics.

“Visitors to VINS are often inspired by one-off educational moments,” Alden says, giving an example from the Owl Festival when a Harris’s hawk flew from trainer to trainer, dipping and diving through the trees along the Canopy Walk. “These are powerful moments, but

it’s important also to develop programs, and even curricula, that help people go deeper, learn more, and move toward collective action.”

Alden points to VINS’ success in the area of childhood education, a foundational part of its offerings. This provides an opportunity for expansion by continuing the curriculum into the older grades. “The Canopy Walk, for example, is a wonderful space for blending people of

all ages, from the youngest kids to their grandparents. Children who are diving into the Spider Web this year may find themselves, in the future, slowing down to observe the canopy from above or taking in the many lessons in the signage along the walk.”

#### A LEGACY OF COLLABORATIVE EFFORT

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Alden finds the very founding of VINS as compelling: a group of local residents who came together and took direct, successful action to protect the Ottauquechee watershed. “I’m curious how we can build on this origin story in our programming. The Canopy Walk, with its inspiring views of the forest and the adjoining wetlands and river, could be a window in this direction. The Harris’s hawk swooping around the Canopy Walk could be a metaphor for what VINS offers: a breathtaking immersion in nature that feels magical, but is actually the result of deep knowledge and collaborative work. Determining the ‘Next Big Thing’ for VINS will also be a collaborative effort.”

At 52, Alden is roughly the same age as VINS. He says he has enjoyed learning about the vision of those who founded VINS, and also of those who moved it from Woodstock to Quechee 20 years ago. “They were and are an ambitious and visionary group. When I hear their stories, I see that, as fantastic as VINS is today, their vision has not yet been fully realized. I look forward to continuing their good work.” 🐦

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