

Dolan Pond Conservation Area — Hidden Gem of West Newton



PHOTO: KEN MALLORY

Dolan Pond in summer

“Drain the swamp!” was the cry back before the value of such habitats drew greater attention in the 1970s. But under the leadership of Helen Heyn, Newton’s first environmental planner, the city acquired much of the land for Dolan Pond Conservation Area in 1979 by eminent domain. The move was strongly supported by a neighborhood group that was against its use for dumping and house lots — even today the lot lines can be found on the city’s maps. The area is named for Dolan Pond, which was originally part of the farm owned by Charles Dolan.

A 1995 naturalist’s resource survey described the Dolan Pond Conservation Area as a hidden gem and concluded that it “provided unique habitat for both wildlife and a variety of plant species that are rare within the City of Newton. Although only 8 acres in extent, the area provides a mosaic of environmental conditions that encourages biological diversity. Although the majority of the area is dominated by red maple swamp, the interspersions of open water, scrub/shrub thickets and wet meadow/vegetated swales provides for a rich wildlife habitat.”

Over 130 species of birds have been observed at Dolan Pond, and during spring migration, daily counts of 20 to 35 species are common in a short walk filled with the song of warblers, vireos, wrens, and thrushes. The ponds are home to painted turtle, snapping turtle, green frog, and bullfrog, and are one of the few breeding areas in Newton for the American Toad, whose springtime trilling chorus is often heard.

Other visitors to Dolan Pond include coyote, fox, muskrat, opossum, deer, and even fisher! Some years ago, one enterprising nature lover even set up an infrared camera in the woods to see what nature activity took place in Dolan after dark — search YouTube for “Coyote Cam Dolan Park.”



Like most open spaces in Newton, the Dolan Pond area is under attack by invasive species. It was actually a pioneer site for both garlic mustard and Japanese knotweed removal, efforts that have been ongoing with NewtonSERVES, EnviSci campers, scouts, and school groups.

Driving by its small opening on busy Auburn Road, you might not notice Dolan Pond Conservation Area, even though it is only a short walk from the restaurants, shops, and the movie theater of downtown West Newton. Its main entrance can be found on the street called Webster Park, off Webster Street (a major connector between West Newton and Auburn Road), just a few short blocks west of Cherry Street. Parking

is easiest on the Webster Park oval, a historic district with a number of fine examples of 19th century architecture. Handicapped parking is available just down the hill at the end of Webster Park, next to the information kiosk.

Despite its relatively small size of almost nine acres, Dolan seems much larger while walking its three main trails, all converging in the center and each leading to one of the entrances. It would be difficult to get lost there — it’s just the right size when you need a quick dose of nature!

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PHOTO: TED KUKLINSKI

Dolan Pond NewtonSERVES Team pulling invasive garlic mustard.

The conservation area actually contains four named ponds, the two larger ones being Dolan Pond (the area's namesake) and Quinn Pond. Dolan Pond has a wide overlook platform popular with parents and children for duck (and duckling), goose, heron, turtle, frog, and tadpole watching.

Quinn Pond is similar in size to Dolan and is viewable along the accessible Auburndale Path boardwalk. In winter, cold air settles in the pond areas and, with the minimal depth (typically one to three feet maximum), the ponds freeze quickly, and one can find hockey goals set up on the ice.



PHOTO: TED KUKLINSKI

A Great Blue Heron explores Dolan Pond

and reached by some short trails off Webster Path, which was named for local neighbor Irene Forte on her 100th birthday.

The ponds are actually what are called vernal pools, temporary ponds filled only by rain water. This is the lowest terrain in the area, and it acts as sponge to absorb local runoff. Tadpoles and many other creatures thrive in such bodies of water devoid of fish. Vernal pools are also by definition somewhat temporary and on occasion dry up completely.

In the summer of 2016, the largest ponds totally dried up and became undulating grassy areas until the abundant spring rains of 2017 overflowed the ponds and even flooded Cumberland Path. As the ponds recede in dry spells, they become a great attraction for herons that like the easy picking. Sandpipers and other shorebirds (once even a long-billed dowitcher) like to work the mudflats thus created. Occasionally, misguided folks will dump unwanted goldfish into the ponds, fish that can turn into sizeable carp, but great blue herons and belted kingfishers soon take notice and enjoy a tasty dinner!

A CDBG (Community Development Block Grant) improvement project was undertaken in 2003, which provided major feature and accessibility improvements to the area. The initial design was done as a landscape architecture degree project and implemented later by the city.



PHOTO: MARGARET MALLORY

Painted Turtle in Dolan Pond

Two of the paths were upgraded with stabilized soil, a kind of natural clay that hardens and is wheelchair accessible. In addition, new steps built from wood and stabilized soil provided easier pedestrian access from neighboring Stratford Road and Cumberland Road. The steps and sitting rocks at Stratford Road provide a convenient meeting place for nature study at Dolan Pond with classes from Franklin and Burr elementary schools. Information kiosks provide a place for maps, events, history, and nature sightings.

The most challenging aspect of the project was the boardwalk along the Auburndale Path through the wetlands area. In some places, the support pilings for the boardwalk had to go down as deep as 13 feet to reach solid footing. Prior to this, the old path and bog bridges were often flooded and impassable in certain times of the year. A great benefit was the new ability for wheelchair users to travel safely all the way between the Webster Park and Auburndale Avenue entrances and to have a true "close to nature" experience along the way.

Irene Forte, a violin teacher and one-time musical director at the All Newton Music School, spent most of her adult life living in the Arts and Crafts style house her father built



PHOTO: KEN MALLORY

Female Mallard on Dolan Pond

around 1925 at the 1.1 acre 76 Webster Park property abutting the conservation area. As she passed the century mark, she was often approached by developers who were eager to buy her property, but she wondered if the city might be interested instead. Before she passed away at age 104, she had instructed her nephew to follow through on her interest in preserving her homestead and land in its natural state.

Luckily, the Community Preservation Act (CPA) had been recently passed in Newton, by which 1% of the real estate tax and matching funds from the state could be used for the acquisition of open space, community housing, historical

preservation, or recreation. The Newton Conservators and the Newton Housing Authority (NHA) partnered on a CPA application to acquire the property from the estate with the condition that as many trees in her backyard be preserved as possible.

Two thirds of the property was preserved as open space and added 10% to the existing Dolan Pond Conservation area, with the Newton Conservators holding and monitoring the conservation restriction on the newest portion. The remaining third was devoted to creating three units of affordable housing — the original house administered by the NHA and a duplex constructed behind as Newton's first Habitat for Humanity project, which was built in the same exterior style with thousands of hours of volunteer assistance. It was a win-win-win for open space, housing, and historical interests.

There will be short, guided walks this fall to Dolan Pond from the Elm Street Farmer's Market in West Newton on some Saturdays with information available at the Newton Conservators' booth there. You can find something new and surprising on every visit! ■

— Ted Kuklinski

👉 Identify This Place Photo Contest: High Points Along The Charles

This will be a two-part contest.

➤ **Part 1:** Take a photo showing the Charles River that you took from a high vantage point above the river in Newton or a neighboring city or town (your chance of winning will be improved if your vantage point is at least 100 feet above sea level). By October 31st, email the photo to contest@newtonconservators.org. Tell us where you were when you took the photo. GPS coordinates or a link to a spot on an online map would be appreciated.

➤ **Part 2:** In the winter newsletter, we'll publish the photo we like best, and ask readers to identify the location. We reserve the right to publish other photos in the newsletter or on our website, with a credit line identifying the photographer.



PHOTO: DAN BRODY

Photo Example

The winner of each part of the contest will receive a one-year new, gift, or renewal membership in the Conservators.