

Woodcock Meadow Restoration — Update

The birders — and the birds — seem to agree: Woodcock Meadow hasn't looked this good in a long time! We're about two years into the meadow restoration project, and good progress has been made.

The work is following the general recommendations of the 2011 Nahanton Park Management Plan by Mass Audubon (jointly commissioned by the Newton Parks & Rec Department and the Newton Conservators) and the 2015 meadow-specific restoration plan by Conservators Advisor Jon Regosin (also Chief of Conservation Science for the state's Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program).

Woodcock habitat

The American Woodcock is identified as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need by the MA Division of Fisheries & Wildlife. It needs a specific habitat — open, sandy grassland — for mating and nesting. Woodcock Meadow is the only such sandy grassland habitat in Newton.

Using aerial photographs, Jon Regosin showed the degradation and diminishment of the meadow that had occurred: huge white pines had filled up the middle, and the edges were filling in with encroachment from pines, black locust and red cedar. Non-native invasive species such as buckthorn, bittersweet, and others were threatening the native grassland species. Birders had noted the reduced numbers of Woodcocks using the meadow for mating.

The restoration plan to remove threatening plant species and manage them and the meadow long term was approved by the Parks & Rec Commission and then by the Integrated Pest Management (IPM) Committee. The goal is to restore and maintain an open meadow grassland dominated by little bluestem grass interspersed with other native species such as bush clover, aster, and goldenrod, with 15–20% native shrub

and small tree cover such as cedar, scrub oak, blueberry, gray birch, and sumac. Phases 1 and 2 (still in process) call for removal of encroaching trees and nonnative invaders; Phase 3 will be maintenance and monitoring, and new plantings.

Work-to-date

The work accomplished to date was done by many people: The city's Forestry Department, which removed trees (contributed from the department's staff/budget); Bartlett Tree Experts using targeted glyphosate (Roundup) application services as approved by IPM and paid by the Conservators Woodcock Meadow fund; volunteers from the Conservators and Friends of Nahanton Park, who participated in seven volunteer sessions in 2016 and three in 2017; and our two interns in the summer of 2017.

We also had several classes of Needham High science students, who removed huge amounts of garlic mustard from the meadow edges in spring 2017 and came back in the fall to learn about, and pull, buckthorn and other invasive plants. (Needham

High has been using Nahanton Park for science study for many years — and when they saw our restoration plan signage in the meadow, they contacted us to ask if they could help.)

City Forestry Department

The tree work done by the city's Forestry Department began in early March 2016 with the removal of the huge white pines in the center of the meadow, and some from the edges. Birders who arrived that night, in hopes of a woodcock mating ritual show, were amazed to see the woodcocks taking off and alighting from the exact spots of the removed trees. The woodcocks seemed to be enjoying the expanded space!



PHOTOS: KEN MALLORY

Drone images of Newton Conservators in Woodcock Meadow



PAINTING: COURTESY OF STIM WILCOX

This woodcock watercolor was painted in late 1940s, by Dr. Arthur M. Stimson.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF COLONIAL SEED COMPANY

Little bluestem grass

Another City tree work day is planned for December 2017, or as soon thereafter as weather permits.

Unfortunately, the wet spring and additional sunlight from the tree removals also gave the invasive species a growth spurt. Bittersweet, for example, is thriving. Also, in midsummer a grove of garlic mustard was found in the center of the meadow, hopefully removed before distributing its seed, but it will require followup next season.

In September patches of the terrible black swallow-wort vine (*Cynanchum louiseae*) were found for the first time in the meadow, next to the picnic tables and by the Upper Parking Lot. The pods were pulled off before the seeds were released, but the plants will be back in the spring — in addition to those coming in the wind from the growing infestation all over the city. Nonnative “lawn” grasses are also thriving at the JCC corner, threatening to invade the little bluestem areas. Management of these invasive species will be an ongoing challenge, and we intend to get consultation advice from other experts.

Longer term

For longer-term meadow management, Jon Regosin notes that over time too much thatch/nutrients builds up and needs to be removed. Possible methods include a “controlled burn” (not very practical for our location), York raking (thatch-removing large rake dragged by a tractor), or hand raking. He has suggested a high-school-student science project involving hand raking in marked treatment areas compared to other areas of the meadow left as the control area. This will be discussed with the Newton and Needham high school science teachers this fall.

The meadow was lovely to behold when we visited in September: the little bluestem was waving in the wind and sun (strangely, it is actually quite tall, and purple). Many birds and pollinators were enjoying the open, peaceful meadow. ■

✿ Katherine Howard

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Even with relatively few members using the program so far, the rewards have grown. For the first quarter we participated in 2014, we received \$22.32. For the most recent quarter in 2017, we received \$40.18.

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