

Thoughts of a Conservators Intern

By Bennett Walkes

Having lived my whole life down the street from Webster Woods, I know firsthand the importance and privilege of Newton's conservation land providing a blissful respite from everyday life and an escape into rural life in a city only a short bike ride away from Boston. When I was young, Webster Woods was a universe of unexplored phenomena with each few paces bringing a rock, flower, pond, or wetlands within grasp; I would wander from path to path to wherever my curiosity would take me until I was hopelessly lost.

When the season of vibrant pink and purple azaleas and rhododendrons passed, and their remaining leaves shriveled up, I would slide over Houghton Pond's frozen surface. I spent countless afternoons jumping and scaling the small cliffs formed by the stunning puddingstone rocks and would hide out in their narrow crevasses. It was when these woods were being sold that I first heard about the work being done by Newton Conservators. Throughout my summer spent with the organization, I learned about the threats to these city parks and conservation areas and efforts to preserve and protect our open space for all to use.

The majority of my time with the Conservators this summer was spent pulling invasive species dominating our open spaces. We began early in the season pulling garlic mustard and slowly transitioned into concentrating on much harder to pull species including knotweed, bittersweet, black swallow-wort, and buckthorn. Before the time I spent this summer walking through our conservation land and attempting to identify the fauna, the only human-engineered threats to our wildlife I was aware of were the effects of climate change and development.

The fields of Tree of Heaven and Japanese Knotweed dominating what were once meadows and diverse understories in Cold Spring Park have since opened my eyes to a whole new world of dangers. While pulling each plant out initially came with a twinge of guilt, we were able to witness the benefits of our work after seeing a monarch butterfly lay eggs on native milkweed a few minutes after we had cleared the area of the invasive black swallow-wort. In the name of preserving biodiversity, clearing whole patches of knotweed by scythe and pulling out particularly large buckthorns with the weed-whacker have since become



PHOTO: BETH WILKINSON

Interns Bennett Walkes and Iris Liao tend to planting a pollinator garden in Woodcock Meadow.

more and more enjoyable. However, it has become difficult for me to walk through my neighborhood or even watch a movie without pointing out whatever invasive species I see.

Gardening for insects is a completely new phenomenon introduced to me this summer that starkly contrasted with my garden at home where I used to ruthlessly apply my organic sprays to keep the aggressive ant colonies and rabbits away. We spent part of the summer planting a pollinator garden at Woodcock

Meadow in Nahant Park. This involved selecting an array of caterpillar host plants as well as nectar plants to support specific species of native pollinators while also stapling a chickenwire fence. While a meadow garden did help achieve a dream of mine to work on a garden with sufficient light, it also required bi-weekly rides across the city with a water bucket strapped to the back of my bike.



PHOTO: KEN MALLORY

Bennett Walkes and Newton Conservator Katherine Howard at the Farmers Market in West Newton.

We spent our Tuesdays and Saturdays at the Newton farmer's markets providing outreach about the organization and information about invasive species. This was a very unique experience for me in comparison to the more hostile

responses I've received while doing political canvassing. While the Cold Spring markets consisted mostly of busy shoppers eager to get out of the market, I was really a surprised how open people were to discuss issues facing our open spaces at the Saturday ones. These events also introduced me to city politics and the issues surrounding it with the many candidates who were campaigning for the past election.

This summer — besides developing a massive fear of ticks — I've learned about what it takes to be a good ecological neighbor to local wildlife and the many actions being undertaken by this organization to protect and preserve our parks. ■