



Working to preserve open space in Newton for 47 years!

The Newton Conservators

NEWSLETTER

Winter Issue

www.newtonconservators.org

December/January/February 2007-2008

NEW HYDE BROOK GIFT

December is a time of giving. In a city where open space is scarce, land is an especially important gift. At Hyde Brook, a second property owner has approached the Newton Conservators to offer a gift of land.

Hyde Brook is a small watercourse that drains a hollow at the rear of house lots on Hyde Avenue and Park Street in Newton Corner. The lots are large and extend to a considerable depth from the roads. On one side of the brook, the land rises steeply and is wooded with hardwoods and scattered pines. On the other side is a

patchwork of growth, with lawns reaching the edge of the brook at some locations and with untended, natural growth at others. The brook flows north and goes underground before reaching the Charles River a mile away. Invasive species like Norway maples stand among natives. A walk in the woods here will turn up an old cellar hole, the foundation of what may have been a gazebo, and a concrete staircase up the slope.

In 2005, the Awtrey family made a gift of a half acre of wooded land. Included with that gift was a means of access by way of a foot path from a neighboring street, as well as funding to help defray any costs the Conservators might face for land management, such as for pruning of fallen trees.

This newest proposed gift is of a parcel that borders the first and that reaches the brook. Its significant feature is its frontage along the brook. Part of the land is a clearing near the brook. Up the slope from the clearing, the land is wooded.

The Conservators' Board has considered the matter of how best to take on a gift of this kind. Until recent years, the only parcel that was owned by the Conservators was the Ordway property on Grant Street. Over the past five years, the Conservators have accepted two gifts of land. We have also accepted conservation restrictions that protect land in its natural state, at properties acquired by the City through Community Preservation Act funds. A conservation restriction limits the uses to which a property may be put. It can be for a specified number of years or can be in perpetuity. Typically, the Conservators become the owners of a perpetual restriction that prevents any excavation, filling, or construction and that requires that the land be maintained in its natural state. The restriction



allows the Conservators to manage the land by planting or removing vegetation, to enhance its value as habitat. Whether the Conservators own the land or own only a restriction, it is necessary that we provide regular monitoring, as part of our role as stewards.

At its November meeting, the Conservators' Board of Directors debated whether it was better to encourage owners to donate land to the City rather than to the Conservators. The Board also discussed whether ownership presented too great a risk, such as from lawsuits, and whether taking on a conservation restriction as an alternative might provide a layer of protection from ownership risks. The Board determined that it favored seeking a conservation restriction and that it would present that response to the property owner.

When a gift is offered, the Conservators first determine whether the property has significant attributes as open space. Members of the Conservators' Land Management Committee visited the Hyde Brook site in early November. The Land Management Committee has inventoried species at most of Newton's open spaces. At Hyde Brook, the committee found that, in spite of the presence of invasives, the property has attributes that make its protection significant for the Conservators' mission.

Hyde Brook is typical of other "pocket" open spaces in Newton. Open space efforts in other parts of the country can involve assembling holdings of tens of thousands of acres. In the city, the scale is smaller. To protect an area as small as a few acres in a hollow like Hyde Brook can involve acquisitions from dozens of land owners. Urban land costs are often prohibitive. Gifts then become important. Gifts of land at Hyde Brook hold out the hope of protection for a natural area that may be small but that is significant for the urban fabric.

- Eric Reenstierna

NATURE'S ALMANAC

NATURE'S RHYTHMS

"I believe there is a subtle magnetism in nature, which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright".

- Henry David Thoreau

Every year around the time when we celebrate Earth Day, I brush away the winter debris in a remote corner of my garden to reveal the pure white flowers of the bloodroot plant (*Sanguinaria canadensis*). For me this is a reliable harbinger of spring. Throughout history, floral blooming, bird migration, the emergence of animals, the appearance of insects, the time for harvesting, and astronomical events have been recorded as a way to keep in touch with nature's rhythms. Long ago our very survival depended on these recordings, and much of our folklore has originated from them. The shadbush (*Amelanchier* species) puts forth its slender white blossoms just as the herring run upstream, historically a cause for celebration – a source of new food after a long, harsh winter for Native Americans and European settlers. Native Americans had a distinctive name for all the full moons to reflect natural phenomena and so to keep track of the seasons - *e.g.*, the Wolf Moon in January when the wolf packs roam, or the Buck Moon when the buck deer sprout new antlers in July. Farmers, beekeepers, gardeners and the like still use practical advice from the Farmer's Almanac to forecast the weather. They keep an eye on the tides and the skies, to find out the best days to plant or harvest a crop.

Today with global warming it is even more important that we monitor and appreciate nature. Indeed, records are



Bloodroot

showing us that nature's rhythms are "out of whack." Spring migrations of warbler species are becoming asynchronous with the emergence of their food source, leaf-eating caterpillars. In turn, pests like the winter moth are increasing in number. Birds like wood ducks and hummingbirds are arriving in the spring much earlier than they did 30 years ago. Highbush blueberry is blooming two weeks early. We should take these signs as a warning, because, as climate change speeds up, these and other species are at risk.

Over the past two years the Land Management Committee of the Newton Conservators has been monitoring nature in 38 conservation areas of Newton. The Committee has built up an inventory of over 750 species of plants, birds, animals, and insects that have been sighted. The data, which have been collected throughout the year, are a good source for monitoring invasive species and for detecting subtle changes in habitat. For the enjoyment of the nature enthusiast, the records can also be used to create an almanac to indicate, for instance, the best places to view the warbler migration, when and where the wildflowers will bloom, the distribution of ferns, or in the fall - witchhazel in bloom, berries and mushrooms.

This article introduces a regular column, "Nature's Almanac." Watch this space in coming issues for more of what we have found in Newton's open spaces. Take a walk with us in Newton's conservation land, and enjoy nature throughout the year.

- Sue Avery

INVASION FROM THE NORTH

Word has passed among Newton bird enthusiasts that this will be a good year for visitors from Northern Forests. Since early November there have been many reports of "winter finches" and other boreal species appearing in Massachusetts. Flocks of **Evening Grosbeaks**, **Pine Grosbeaks**, **Purple Finches**, **Common Redpolls**, **Pine Siskins** and **Crossbills** have been spotted in greater numbers than usual in areas across the state. In coming weeks it's likely that some of them will show up at feeders in your yard or during your walks in parks here in Newton. Many of these are regarded as rarities in these parts, so if you're interested in seeing them, keep your feeders full and your binoculars handy!

Many of these finches, as well as other visitors from the north, breed in the coniferous forests of Canada. When snow and cold weather come, they disperse across the

landscape in search of food. During most winters few of them appear as far south as New England, but in occasional years, they arrive here in large numbers. It has been assumed that they may wander south into this area because of a limited food supply in their home territory. However, there seems to be no fixed pattern to such appearances, and these winter "irruptions," as they are called, are not predictable.

This year you may be lucky enough to have **Evening Grosbeaks** at your feeders. They announce their presence with noisy calls, and they are strikingly handsome, with bright yellow coloration and large, white wing patches. They can clean you out of feed in no time, but a visit from them is a treat well worth pounds of sunflower seeds!

Evening Grosbeak



There's a small chance you may see **Pine Grosbeaks** as well. They are a bit larger, about, the size of robins, with males having a reddish tint and females appearing quite gray with a yellow wash on head and back. Pine Grosbeaks more often turn up in orchards or overgrown fields, feeding on berries or fruit they find there.

Common Redpolls have also been seen in large numbers this winter. They, too, hunt in flocks, searching for birch catkins, their favorite food. To find them, look for stands of birch trees and search among the tips of outermost branches for very small birds with broad streaks on their bellies. They sport a tiny red cap on the front of their heads and have stubby little beaks. Should you spot a flock, look carefully for any bird among them appearing much paler than the others, with less streaking on its flanks. It might be the rare **Hoary Redpoll**, long regarded as a separate species. (If you find one, please call me pronto!)

The finch most often seen here in winter is our **American Goldfinch**, its bright summer colors faded to a pale greenish yellow. These birds breed throughout New England, and many spend the entire winter here. This year, when you have a group of them at your feeder, look also for **Pine Siskins**. This species breeds farther north and follows a nomadic pattern in the search for food. Siskins often team up with Goldfinches, but their sparrow-like brown streaking and the yellow markings in their wings and tail feathers make them easy to distinguish. They can also be detected by their call, a loud buzzing wheeze slurring upward in pitch. Pine Siskins have already been reported in larger numbers than usual.

Bohemian Waxwings are another group of winter wanderers from the North. They move in small flocks, dropping in almost anywhere they can find the fruit seeds they need. I've seen them swarming over ornamental cherry trees planted in a shopping mall. Flocks of them have been reported in northern counties of our state, but finding them in Newton would be a real coup! Nahanton Park, with its berry bushes and wild cherry trees, might attract them..

If you walk past an open field in one of our parks and spot what seems to be a **Northern Mockingbird** on a fence post or telephone wire, look twice. If it has a black mask-like streak running across its eye and a curved beak with a hook at the tip, it must be a **Northern Shrike**. That's another one of these unpredictable winter visitors, easily mistaken for a Mockingbird. The size and coloration of these two are almost the same, and both species occur during the winter, but a Mockingbird will stick to shrubs and berry-bearing bushes in search of food. A Shrike hunts for its small animal prey in open areas.

Red Crossbills and **White-winged Crossbills** limit their food to the seeds of pine cones. With their unique bill structure, they are able to pry these cones apart and extract the seeds hidden inside. To find them one must search among the coniferous trees in wooded parks or cemeteries. Crossbills have been seen this year in coastal areas to the north, but chances are good they will be found somewhere here in Newton this winter.

Hawk Owls and **Great Gray Owls**, larger denizens of Northern Forests, are occasional winter visitors, but they appear in very small numbers in Massachusetts, and so far as I know, they have never been seen in Newton. The **Snowy Owl**, a raptor with its home base in the tundra, is seen here in New England every winter, usually in open areas along the coast. Its numbers vary unpredictably from year to year.

Of course we enjoy all those locally breeding birds which remain here through the winter – American Robins, Eastern Bluebirds, Mourning Doves, Carolina Wrens, Black-capped Chickadees, White-breasted Nuthatches, Tufted Titmice, Northern Cardinals, etc. - but it's these rare visitors from the north that are likely to tempt true birders to spend a whole day out in the bitter cold.

- M.G. Criscitiello



Northern Hawk Owl

CRYSTAL LAKE – ONE GREAT POND!

(This article is from Robert Fizek, a Newton resident active in the effort to expand the City's waterfront park at Crystal Lake. The Conservators have advocated for the land acquisitions to which he refers.)

The Newton Highlands-based Citizens for a Better Lake has initiated and worked with the Ward 6 Aldermen, the Mayor, the Newton Highlands Neighborhood Council, and the Newton Conservators in support of the CPA-funded acquisition of property adjacent to the old bathhouse and parking lot at Crystal Lake. By next spring, the 20 Rogers Street house will have been removed, the front fence will come down, and the large and lovely shaded lawn area behind the beach will be available for public use.

Recently, the owner of the property at 230 Lake Avenue (adjacent to the house at 20 Rogers Street) entered into an

agreement with the City for the right to purchase this property that now sits between the new public open space and the existing park at Levingston Cove. This second purchase is contingent upon CPC funding and pending Aldermanic approvals. This vision for completing a South Cove Park will allow for the continuation of the walk along the shore from Levingston Park to the swimming area. It also provides for the protection of the waterfront landscape and the possible preservation of the home located there. (This could not be assured if the property is sold to a private party.) A Citizen Task Force has been established by the City this summer, has met several times, and is already reviewing and coordinating with City departments in developing guidelines and limitations for the sensible use and development of the land and facilities located there.

The ideas and concerns expressed by citizens at last year's public meeting form the basis for criteria that will inform a master plan for the park. (The Concept Sketch shown on the betterlake Web site is only one possible version drawn from the public input.) Along with this effort, a non-profit organization, "The Crystal Lake Conservancy," is being formed to coordinate the interests of organizations and individuals in providing community participation and fund-raising support for the preservation and renewal of the area, as well as to promote the good stewardship and care of the lake as a whole.

There is a long way to go before we realize the full benefit of this opportunity. It will involve City-wide interest and participation to celebrate and protect the unique natural beauty of this environment, to support the renewal of the public facilities there with the creation of a beautiful, sustainable waterfront park for sensible and safe water activities, and to provide for year-round passive recreation use for all of Newton's citizens.

If you support a better future for Crystal Lake and want information, contact betterlake@gmail.com and visit the following Web sites:

Citizens for a Better Lake: www.betterlake.com
The Newton Conservators: www.newtonconservators.org

Contact the Mayor at dcohen@newtonma.gov and your Aldermen, to express your support.

COMING EVENTS

Bountiful Backyards (December Environmental Show on NewTV's Blue Channel)

December's Environmental Show is entitled "Bountiful Backyards - Fruit Trees and Vegetables" and features a lecture by Greg Maslowe, Farm Manager at Newton Angino Community Farm. Newton is the "Garden City" and Greg advocates the use of the many backyards (and front yards) for gardening. He notes that a large space is not required for productive use. In this show, you will see many examples of Newton yards that have optimized their growing areas and produce bountiful crops. This is Part 2 of a lecture given at the Newton Conservators Annual Meeting earlier this year. Watching this program may inspire you to convert some of your lawn area to more productive use.

Newton Christmas Bird Count (December 16, 2007)

If you have an interest in our feathered friends, perhaps you'd like to take part in the annual Christmas Bird Count on Sunday, December 16th, begun in 1900 and done annually all over the country by teams of birders. Five teams head out on Count Day, starting around 7 am, to the open spaces throughout Newton, performing a census of all birds seen. There's special interest this year in the reports of numbers of winter finches and other irruptive species (such as Redpolls, Pine Siskins, Evening Grosbeaks, and Red-breasted Nuthatches) being seen in Eastern Massachusetts. Will you be the first to spot a Bohemian Waxwing in Newton? Experienced and non-experienced birders are welcome, and newcomers will be paired with an experienced group. If this sounds interesting to you, please contact Newton count coordinator Cris Criscitiello (617-244-6397, mgcrisci@massmed.org). The count is sponsored locally by the Newton Conservators and nationally by the National Audubon Society and Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. To see last year's results, visit the Audubon Web site at <http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc/>.

A Very Open House at the Newton Habitat Project - Home Makeover: Extreme Edition Meets Habitat for Humanity

On Sunday, December 30, at 1:00 p.m., there will be a site open house at 76 Webster Park, where the Newton Conservators, with the Newton Housing Authority, arranged for expansion of the open space at Dolan Pond and development of affordable housing. The open house includes a visit by the newest Extreme Home Makeover Design Team member, Rib Hillis (son of the Conservators' own Duane Hillis).

NEWS FROM THE FARM

(This item was excerpted from Greg Maslowe's "The Newton Farmer" email newsletter for the Angino Farm. Greg is the farmer.)

2007 was a year of incredible growth for the farm (no pun intended). We increased production to the entire field, and produced almost 50% more vegetables than in 2006. In addition, we began planting the permaculture beds on the periphery of the field with fruit trees (pears, Asian pears, filberts, and paw paws) and berries (blueberries, blackberries, and strawberries). As these crops mature in the coming years we will have much more fruit to add to our offerings. Which is a good thing because this year the raspberries proved wildly popular, as did the watermelons. It seems there's a real craving for fresh organically-grown fruit. . . .

So what's ahead for 2008? . . . Thanks to our neighbors in the Ledgebrook Condominiums, we have a little more space than we used to. Ledgebrook is allowing the farm to use a piece of its land to plant a research and teaching orchard. The orchard will be mostly apples, with a few cherries and peaches. A main goal of the orchard is to compare apples and learn which varieties grow best in our environment. We'll use what we learn in the orchard as the farm pursues its goal of getting Newton homeowners to plant fruit trees and shrubs in their yards.

2008 will also see the farm branching out from fruits and vegetables (again, no pun intended) into livestock. What's that grazing in the field? Cows? No, bees! We're having four bee hives put on the farm in the spring. As we all heard this summer, bee populations across the country are declining due to a new virus. Although we didn't seem to have any shortage of wild bees, we'll be installing our own hives to ensure good pollination (which will be very important as our fruit trees mature) and provide honey for the farm stand. The bees will also be an important educational tool, helping us teach about the interconnection and interdependence of life.

Ted Kuklinski reports that the Conservators, who had held title to the property, conveyed title to the housing site to Habitat for Humanity in August. Writes Ted, "The Conservators filled a requested role in holding the land until a special permit was obtained to subdivide the property into three portions and to sort out the legal issues. (Thanks to attorney Bill Shaevel for his fine *pro bono* work.) One portion (two thirds of the lot) was conveyed to the city as open space to be added to the adjacent Dolan Pond Conservation Area. Another portion, consisting of the original 1925 era house, was totally renovated by the NHA and is now a family rental property contributing to increasing the proportion of affordable housing in Newton."

Bike Rally

The Newton Conservators will co-sponsor a bike rally, "Bike Newton: Making Newton a Bicycle-Safe City" on May 18th, 1 pm, at Newton City Hall War Memorial. The rally is to demonstrate interest in support of city improvements to bicycle safety and accommodations, particularly if the City is to meet the goals as defined in the Transportation and Mobility chapter of the Draft Comprehensive Plan. Green Decade Coalition and the Newton Health Department (as well as the Conservators) are sponsoring this event. The main speaker will be Dr. Anne Lusk of the Harvard School of Public Health. Police detectives have offered to do a stunt demonstration. Says Lois Levin, organizer of the event, "I don't think they know how to ride bikes on the walls and ceiling, but some of them have been trained to go up and down steps. Apart from having a serious purpose, the event will be fun. I am hoping to offer free ice cream, too."

Shop and Benefit the Newton Conservators at the Same Time

Mark your calendars for Wednesday, February 27th to go shopping at a large retail store (hint - it begins with B) at the Chestnut Hill Mall. The Newton Conservators, along with some other select non-profits, are participating in a special event that day at the store where customers will receive discounts, be able to attend a fashion show, etc. Tickets for this special event will be available in January for a \$10 donation to the Newton Conservators. If you visit the store that day, the retailer will contribute an additional \$5 to the Conservators to support their important programs. Watch for further details in our email updates and on our Web site. You can donate when you renew your membership or mail a check to The Newton Conservators, Inc., PO Box 590011, Newton Centre, MA 02459. (Mention Feb 27.)

MISSION

Newton Conservators, Inc.

The Newton Conservators promotes the protection and preservation of natural areas, including parks, playgrounds, forests and streams, which are open or may be converted to open space for the enjoyment and benefit of the people of Newton. It further aims to disseminate information about these and other environmental matters.

A primary goal is to foster the acquisition of land, buildings and other facilities to be used for the encouragement of scientific, educational, recreational, literary and other public pursuits that will promote good citizenship and the general welfare of the people of our community.

The Newton Conservators was formed as a not-for-profit organization 47 years ago in June 1961.

The Newton Conservators Newsletter© has been published five times each year by the Newton Conservators, Inc. This year, we have moved to a four-issue schedule. Issues will be published in June, September, December, and March. Deadlines for these issues are the fifth of each month in which an issue is scheduled to be published.

We welcome material related to our mission from any source. Send proposed articles or letters by email in MS Word or rich text format to ericgreen@tiac.net. Digitized photographs, maps and diagrams are also welcome.

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**Your dues are due! Now is the time to pay your 2008 dues. Please renew today.
And consider a tax-deductible gift to support our work!**



*Celebrating 47 years
of open space advocacy
in Newton*

Newton Conservators Membership Form

PO Box 590011, Newton Centre, MA 02459 • www.newtonconservators.org

- ☐ YES, I'd like to start/renew my one-year membership with the Newton Conservators to help preserve open space in Newton. I'll receive informative newsletters and emails and be invited to participate in guided tours of local conservation areas, lectures, and other programs and activities.
- ☐ I'd like to make an additional tax-deductible contribution to support the work of the Newton Conservators: \$_____
- ☐ Please do not share my name and address with other groups.

MEMBERSHIP OPTIONS

- ☐ Individual member \$25
- ☐ Family member \$35
- ☐ Sustaining member \$50
- ☐ Donor \$75
- ☐ Patron \$100

All amounts are tax deductible

NAME _____

STREET _____ VILLAGE _____ ZIP _____

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The Newton Conservators **NEWSLETTER**

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