



**NEWTON  
CONSERVATORS**

SUMMER ISSUE

# NEWSLETTER

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## Webster Woods: A Natural Place of Memories and Discoveries

*Richard B. Primack, Professor of Biology at Boston University and a lifelong Newton resident*

**Editor's Note:** This article is an expansion of an article originally written in the *Newton TAB*, April 4, 2019.

**“Nature will bear the closest inspection. She invites us to lay our eye level with her smallest leaf, and take an insect view of its plain.” *Henry David Thoreau***

I have walked and explored the Webster Woods and the larger Hammond Woods for over 60 years. At 114 acres, this landscape of forests, wetlands, and rock outcrops is the largest natural area in Newton. They are my favorite natural gardens in Newton, providing opportunities in all seasons for recreation, relaxation, and new experiences for myself, my children, friends, students, and neighbors. I still explore these woods almost every day and continue to make new discoveries.



*Richard Primack examines marigold plant*

I hope that residents and the city continue to protect these woods so that future generations of Newton families can create their own memories and discoveries.

My favorite place in the woods is Bare Pond, which is a vernal pool next to the rear



*Eric Olson explains pond life in Webster Woods vernal pool*

parking lot of the Boston College property on the Newton Center side of Hammond Pond Parkway. In early spring, the pond is alive with calling frogs and toads, and newly arrived migratory birds searching for insects at the pond edges. It even has a built-in bench — a puddingstone rock shelf above one side of the pond, which is perfect for relaxing and talking with friends. In late spring and summer, I lean over the shore of the pond to study tiny crustaceans chugging through the water and water beetles darting about. If I am very lucky, I see the aquatic larvae of spotted salamanders.

When our children were small, they waded enthusiastically in the pond. In fall, the fringing border of black gums, red maples, and highbush blueberries along the pond

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*Bare Pond in Winter*

turn brilliant colors of red and orange. In winter, the pond freezes and becomes an enchanted woodland skating rink, perfect for my favorite ice activity — to run and slide standing up as far as I can.



*Lady Slipper Orchid*

Rock, there is almost always a redback salamander underneath. One time, lifting the rock, I surprised a small ringneck snake, and another time I uncovered a yellow spotted salamander, which looked gigantic compared to the small redbacks.

Just above Bare Pond to the west is a dry, rocky ridge covered with stunted oak trees, only 20 to 30 feet tall, interspersed with large boulders, lying where they were dropped 15,000 years ago. On the north side of the ridge is a cliff with small black birches growing from rock crevices as wild bonsai trees.

A natural seepage of water flows across one vertical rock face and freezes during the winter; in late winter and early spring, melting water seeps below the 10-foot-high transparent ice sheet, creating rippling patterns in constant motion.



*Webster Woods boulder*

At the upper end of the Vale, along the extension of Madoc Street, is a large and growing population of native bloodroot that my students and I planted 24 years ago as an experiment in wildflower restoration ecology. Their large, eight-petaled white flowers make a striking display for one week in April each year. We planted seven other wildflower species throughout the woods, but they have since died out.

A third favorite spot is the wet, low-lying section of the dirt road that runs westward and downhill from the parking lot on the Boston College property towards the Vale and Newton Center. The combination of partial sun, moisture, and slight disturbance makes this a hot spot for biological activity. This is the one place I have seen the rattlesnake plaintain, a small orchid, as well as Indian cucumber root and club moss.

Another favorite spot is the Vale, a valley between the eastern extensions of Madoc, Elgin, and Warren streets, which are all good entry points into the woods. The Vale is a self-contained ecosystem, with a surprisingly intact community of wildflowers, shrubs and trees, and a small winding stream. The shrubs in the bottom of the Vale provide a succession of flowers: spicebush in spring, coast pepperbush in summer, and witch hazel in fall. The Vale also has the largest sassafras tree I have seen in Newton, plus numerous beech trees and yellow birches.



*Boston University grad student Lucy Zipf collecting twigs of oak and high bush blueberry for studies of bud dormancy in winter.*

Last summer, my family members noticed an aggregation of peculiar flightless black beetles on the leaves of ground vegetation here. After some detective work, we discovered that these were a kind of blister beetle known as oil beetles because they exude a highly toxic chemical from their joints when disturbed. This spot is also notable for the abundance of gravelly rocks of various sizes on the road. Sometimes I



*Salamander Rock in Webster Woods*

Growing up, I spent many hours reading and thinking next to the stream, watching the water flow by. Along the valley path is a flat rock about 18 inches square, that I call Salamander Rock. From the first warm days of spring until the cold weather of autumn, whenever I tilt Salamander

challenge my children and students to pick up a handful and see if they can hit a tree or a metal sign; opportunities to throw rocks are not so frequent for modern kids.

Even after so many years, I keep making new discoveries. Just last summer, I discovered an abundance of a delicious mushroom popping up in a narrow, curved, 150-yard long band. Is this the remnant of some ancient giant fairy ring?



And this past autumn, on the cliffs above Hammond Pond, I found a large hanging puddingstone rock suspended two feet above the ground, where thousands of years ago it had become pinned between two rock faces, frozen mid-fall.

These woods are full of memories and discoveries. It was here I learned to adventure as a child in Newton's largest forest. As a teenager and young adult, I learned how to identify plants and spent endless afternoons hanging out with friends. Later I brought my children and students here to learn about nature and have fun. As a professional

botanist, I studied the reproductive biology of lady's slipper orchids, the restoration of rare wildflower populations, the sex expression of red maple trees, and impacts of climate change on the leafing out times of trees — all in these woods.

The Webster Woods is a special place for me, and also for my family, friends, and students. Many other Newton families and residents have similar ties to these woods. We are lucky to have them, and we need to protect them. ♦

## Adventures in Monarchy

Many years ago, we got some wildflower seed packs and started a garden in our front yard in place of grass. One year we noticed a new plant in the far corner of the yard. When it flowered later, we learned that this plant was common milkweed. Over a few years it spread farther and farther with our encouragement until we had a sizeable stand of it throughout the lawn surrounding our modest flower garden.

Milkweed is aptly named due to its milky sap when a stem or leaf is cut. On the other hand, the “weed” in its name might be a factor in its unnecessary removal; it has pretty and fragrant pink flowers in June and July, which are very attractive to bees and other pollinators. Two other types of milkweed are also commonly found in New England — swamp milkweed, which has pretty pink flowers and narrower leaves, and butterfly weed, with attractive orange flowers.

Monarch butterflies lay their eggs only on milkweed, and their population is being threatened by loss of milkweed habitat and the use of pesticides. And in our experience over recent years, sightings of monarchs were fewer and fewer, some seasons only resulting in two or three sightings.



*Male Monarch on asters, note dark spots on the wing.*



*Milkweed in garden*

We went on a quest in our garden to find Monarch eggs. The eggs are very small white ovoids, standing up like tiny footballs on end, usually just one per leaf. On common milkweed, they prefer the undersides of the more tender leaves on younger plants or the newer leaves at the tops of taller plants. A magnifier can be very helpful in distinguishing the eggs from little leaking milk-like sap drops. If a Monarch is landing on a milkweed leaf, grabbing onto the top and putting its posterior underneath, it is likely a female laying an egg. In their lifetime, female Monarchs may lay 300-400 eggs; sadly, only a very small percentage survive from their many predators such as ants, spiders or flies.

Early on, I was able to identify and tag the leaves that had eggs, but in most cases checking them out later, the eggs had disappeared due to predators. We learned a simple method of increasing the survival odds is to simply pick the leaf and keep it in a small transparent sealed container lined with a moist paper towel. The egg can hatch in this small “nursery,” which can be kept indoors at a comfortable temperature. When the eggs hatch, the tiny caterpillar will eat its shell and begin chewing a small area of the leaf, leaving a crescent shaped hole at first, and generating tiny poppy seed-like

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