

Newton Trails During the Pandemic

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During the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, there was a huge increase in the number of walkers (and cyclists) in Newton's natural areas. Many new visitors were families with young children and groups of teenagers. As a result, city officials



A sign in Auburndale Park gives directions and a notice about social distancing.

posted signs about social distancing, one-way paths, playground equipment closures, and prohibitions against bicycles in certain areas. Some of these new practices remain in place, even now that the majority of Newton residents have been vaccinated. In the second year of the pandemic, the number of people using our open spaces is considerably greater than before the pandemic.

In some areas, such as portions of Cold Spring Park and along the Charles River, trails have always been wide enough for people to stay six feet apart when passing each other. In other conservation areas, such as Webster Conservation Area and DCR's Hammond Reservation,

however, many trails were quite narrow. During the pandemic, people adapted to the new spacing requirements by stepping off the paths to let others pass. Unfortunately, this resulted in many trails getting widened and muddy.

In some places, what were formerly narrow, leaf-covered, forest trails have been transformed into 3- to 10-foot-wide cleared tracks. Many trails have become severely eroded, exposing rocks and tree roots. People riding bicycles along the trails have contributed to this trail damage, as bicycle tires disturb the soil, allowing it to wash away during rainstorms.



Exposed tree roots and rocks where the soil has been eroded.

While the erosion of trails is an unintentional consequence of use, the proliferation of structures built for fun from

dead branches and tree trunks is more deliberately altering Newton's open spaces. Some lean-to structures have been built against living trees and large stones; other structures are free-standing. One such structure on the ridge above Hammond Pond is quite substantial with walls and a roof.

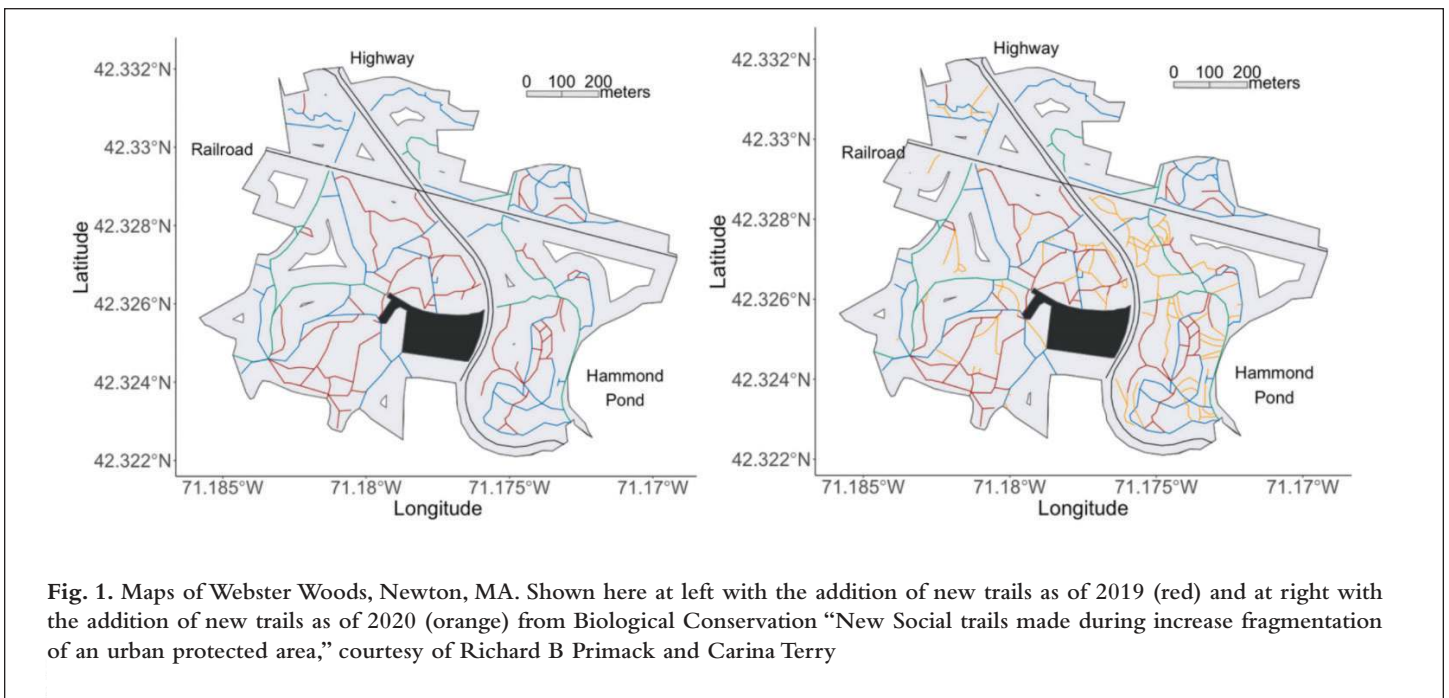


Fig. 1. Maps of Webster Woods, Newton, MA. Shown here at left with the addition of new trails as of 2019 (red) and at right with the addition of new trails as of 2020 (orange) from Biological Conservation "New Social trails made during increase fragmentation of an urban protected area," courtesy of Richard B Primack and Carina Terry

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A lean-to structure is seen in Auburndale Park.

The construction of such structures is contrary to the good land stewardship “leave no trace” practice intended to protect natural areas, wildlife habitat, and passive recreation experiences.

New social trails

Especially during the first few months of the pandemic, hikers and mountain bikers created many new paths, perhaps as a way to avoid crowded existing trails and to explore and experience new areas. These types of new trails are sometimes called “social trails,” as they are made by visitors rather than officially designed by the managers of the property.



A newly created path in the Hammond Woods runs through a patch of wildflowers.

Social trails are considered problematic in natural areas because they damage sensitive vegetation, increase erosion, and fragment wildlife habitat, in the process reducing the total area of habitat, altering environmental conditions of light and humidity, and inhibiting the movement of species. People and dogs walking on social trails can

disturb birds and other wildlife, particularly during times of reproduction, leading to the decline or loss of sensitive species. Social trails can also provide entry points for invasive species.

Great increase in trail formation

Prior to the pandemic, the Webster/Hammond area was already extensively fragmented. Hammond Pond Parkway



This sign in Webster Woods emphasizes protecting natural areas.

and the Riverside Green Line divided the Woods into four separate sections. A network of dirt roads and trails within each quadrant left few areas of habitat that was farther than 50 yards from any road or trail. Due to its irregular shape, the boundary of the Webster Woods—without the highway, railroad, and the Boston College property—is 3.5 miles. The combined outlines

of the parkway, railroad, and Boston College property add another 1.9 miles of boundary.

In 1972, when I completed my inventory of the flora of the Webster/Hammond area, dirt roads and trails had a total length of 5.2 miles. Between 1972 and 2019, an additional 3.3 miles of social trails had been added by hikers and bicyclists, bringing the total length of dirt roads and trails in the Woods to 8.5 miles. During the first four months of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, 3.0 miles of new social trails were created by hikers and bikers, an increase of 36% in the length of trails in the area. In these few months, almost as many new social trails were created as had been created during the previous 48 years. This is truly incredible! This recent fragmentation substantially reduced the amount of interior habitat in the woods. Now, almost every spot in the woods is within 50 yards of a trail, road, or boundary, and it is hard to find an isolated place in the woods where you can sit quietly and be by yourself.

As the pandemic restrictions began to ease in July 2020 and when signs prohibiting biking in the woods were posted, the level of mountain biking in the Webster Woods did significantly diminish. By the end of 2020, the number of walkers and bicyclists in the woods appeared to be far below the peak March-June levels, though still considerably above pre-pandemic levels, and no additional social trails were created. The second wave of COVID-19 restrictions



Signage prohibiting bicycles.

in December 2020 did not appear to result in an increase in visitors to the Woods, possibly due to the colder weather dampening some people's willingness to walk and bike outside.

Efforts to restore the damage

With the arrival of autumn and winter 2020, a layer of fallen leaves and snow covered the

woodland floor and obscured the new trails. City officials began closing access to some of the new trails with fallen branches. The hope was that many of the new trails created in 2020 would disappear and no longer be used. However, as the spring of 2021 arrived, it was apparent that many of these social trails persisted. Many of these new trails are

still being used by hikers, especially where they extend the trail system into previously inaccessible areas and provide convenient short cuts between older trails.

The Newton Conservators Commission has implemented management strategies to close certain new social trails that are perceived to be particularly damaging because they have increased erosion on steep slopes or because they cross wetlands or other sensitive habitats. Actions being taken include blocking entry points with fallen tree branches and rock walls, and posting signs saying trails are closed. Other Newton residents are also stepping up to help restore the park. During the fall, Ethan Faulkner, an Eagle Scout, "erased" one extensive new social trail and a badly eroded connector trail and created a new appropriately located connector trail. Full recovery of the closed trails will likely take at least several years via the re-sprouting of low shrubs where they have been damaged; active plant restoration is not needed at these sites.

The Conservation Commission is allowing certain social trails to remain where they improve visitor flow and access. The Commission will continue to work to close others in an effort to restore the health of the woodland ecosystem. In any case, the Webster Woods will bear the legacy of the pandemic for many years and perhaps decades to come. ♦

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