



**NEWTON
CONSERVATORS**

F A L L I S S U E

NEWSLETTER

Preserving open space and connecting people to nature since 1961

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Please Help to Protect Newton's Conservation Areas from Misuse and Abuse

By Jennifer Steel, Chief Environmental Planner, City of Newton

The Newton Conservation Commission cares for over 310 acres of natural open spaces in the city.

Some of the larger conservation parcels

get a lot of use by walkers, joggers, birdwatchers, and dog walkers from all over the city and region; some of the smaller parcels tend to be used only by nearby residents. Newton's conservation areas and the other natural open spaces cared for by state agencies or the Newton Parks, Recreation & Culture Department, are critical to the city's overall ecological health. These wooded areas provide habitat for native species, rainwater capture that feeds our streams and rivers in times of low rainfall, and biological and physical filtering of stormwater that removes pollutants from our environment. They all contribute to a cooler environment and the quality of life that city residents enjoy. They provide sanctuaries of tranquility and healing, opportunities for exercise, and safe spaces to share with family and friends.

Most users of these precious places respect and care for them. They abide by the land use regulations, pick up litter, help remove invasive plants, volunteer on workdays, and

donate funds and infrastructure to ensure that these public spaces are as nice as they can be for all to enjoy.



Dirt bikes at the Norumbega Conservation Area

Unfortunately, three of our largest and most cherished conservation areas are being actively damaged, not only by people who ignore protective regulations but even commit outright vandalism. Unleashed dogs have been a long-term problem in Webster, Saw Mill Brook,

and Norumbega Conservation Areas. Dog poop is often left in the woods and on the trails; dogs may erode stream banks, harass native wildlife, trample delicate understory plants, and frighten or dissuade others from using these parcels for tranquil enjoyment. Now fires, graffiti, motorized vehicles – from electric mountain bikes to dirt bikes (i.e., motorcycles) and outright vandalism are all becoming more common. The Conservation Commission needs everyone's help in stopping this escalation of damage.

In the Webster Conservation Area, graffiti has turned beautiful rocky cliffs and outcroppings and the rocks of the large vernal pool into blighted areas of spray paint (see photos next page). Webster Conservation Area

Continued on page 2



PHOTO: JENNIFER STEEL

Graffiti in Webster Woods



PHOTO: JENNIFER STEEL

Norumbega's protective fence ("Before")



PHOTO: JENNIFER STEEL

Norumbega's protective fence just days later

has also suffered a proliferation of off-trail bike riding and new trail creation -- killing vegetation, fragmenting wildlife habitats, and exacerbating erosion.

Saw Mill Brook Conservation Area is subject to frequent dumping of trash and yard waste in its parking lot, as well as graffiti on a magnificent outcropping of bedrock near the babbling brook.

Norumbega Conservation Area has seen the most rampant misuse over the past several years. A large and elaborate platform was built to facilitate use of an (illegal) rope swing, cutting into the roots of mature trees. Numerous "campfires" have been set, one of which became a significant ground fire that charred trees and roots. Staff have had to paint over crude graffiti sprayed on large trees. In 2019 the Newton Conservation Office spent \$50,000 to restore an extremely

eroded slope above the Charles River and install a footpath to preserve the bank's mature trees and reestablish an understory. In July 2023 the Conservation Office spent another \$5,500 to add slope stabilizing jute netting, understory plantings, and a visually unobtrusive fence to protect the planted areas, but the signs asking people to respect the restoration area and the protective fence were ripped out, destroyed and burned. Recently, motorcycles were seen entering the conservation area.

Repairs and restoration work are expensive. They absorb both time and money that could otherwise be used for proactive improvement projects. In an effort to catch those responsible for destructive acts, the Conservation Commission is considering placing cameras in some of its parcels.

We are fortunate to have so many wonderful oases of open space in Newton. The vast majority of residents respect and help care for them. Here are some ways you can help:

- The Newton Conservation Office coordinates a group of Volunteer Land Stewards who take responsibility for periodically walking a conservation parcel and reporting their findings to the Conservation Office. If you are interested in joining, contact the Conservation Office (conservation@newtonma.gov).
- Report damage, trail maintenance needs, or opportunities for improvement to the Conservation Office by calling 617-796-1134 or emailing photos and an annotated map to conservation@newtonma.gov.
- If, when you are out on a conservation parcel, you see someone ignoring the regulations who seems open to conversation, point out what is amiss. Many users are unaware of the problems associated with off-leash dogs, the damage created by off-trail use, or the trail erosion that even non-motorized bikes can cause. Gentle education can go a long way towards creating a culture of stewardship.
- If you see vandalism in progress and can do so safely, report it to the Newton Police. ♦