



**NEWTON
CONSERVATORS**

SPRING ISSUE

NEWSLETTER

Preserving open space and connecting people to nature since 1961

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The Charles River Greenway at 30

By Richard B. Primack (a lifelong Newton resident and professor at Boston University)

The Upper Charles River Reservation, one of Newton's open-space gems, is

home to the Charles River Greenway, beloved and heavily used by pedestrians, joggers, dog walkers, and bicyclists, as well as fishers, bird watchers, and people seeking the tranquility of nature. The Greenway, opened to the public around 1992 and completed in 2004, is now around 30 years old!

The Greenway, also sometimes called the Pathway, runs along both sides of the river



Stone dust trail along the Greenway

from Galen Street in Watertown through Newton to Moody Street in Waltham and then on to Commonwealth Avenue in Newton and Weston. Its paths are wide and well-maintained, built with a combination of asphalt and stabilized stone dust or with elevated boardwalks

where the terrain is steep or wet. From the Greenway, the Charles River is almost always visible, with frequent overlooks and footbridges that cross the river.

In some places, the Greenway feels wild, where it enters stands of red and silver maples. Elsewhere the Greenway feels more urban as it

passes parking lots, warehouses, industrial companies, private homes, and apartment buildings.



The Charles River flows through the Greenway

The Greenway is so much a part of the fabric of Newton, Watertown, and Waltham that it

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Asphalt trail along the Greenway

Reservation, local residences and businesses had extended their activities down to the river, often erecting fences, building parking lots, and storing materials that blocked public access.

Starting in 1991, the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), led by an energetic park planner and project manager named Dan Driscoll, began the process of reasserting state control over the river margin and building the Charles River Greenway so that people could enjoy the beauty of the Charles. The DCR faced a huge challenge with almost 100 residential and business encroachments along the river's edge in Watertown, Newton, and Waltham.

Greenway goals and design

The DCR had three major goals in pursuing this project. First, they wanted to restore the natural environment to provide a home for native plant and animal life. Second, they wanted to provide public access to the river along a connected series of paths. Third, they wanted to reconnect the public to the Charles River ecosystem.

With passionate persuasion and the underlying argument that abutters were trespassing on public land, Driscoll



Housing next to walking paths

convinced residents and businesses to remove their fences, parking lots, and other structures. This opened the area so that DCR could build paths and restore natural areas on public land along the river. To promote natural diversity and provide wildlife habitat, the agency minimized site disturbance during construction. They left native vegetation in place and restored sites that had been degraded by development and other human activities. Restoration included extensive planting of native tree species like river birch, red maple, white pine, and native shrubs like bayberry,

winterberry, and viburnum. The DCR even deliberately left a section of riverbank on the Waltham side to be path-free and wild.

To keep maintenance costs down and enhance sustainability, DCR used long-lasting, sturdy materials, such as stone



Different bridges cross the Charles River along the Greenway, like the one above.

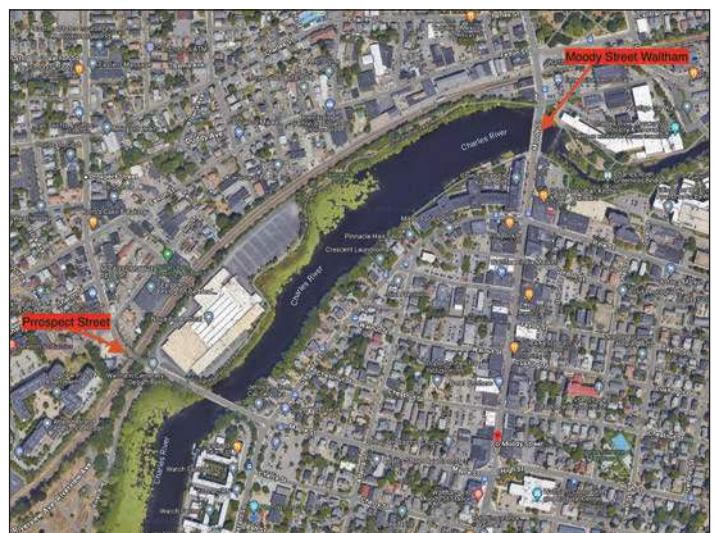
signs and solidly built boardwalks, overlooks, and bridges. The state doesn't plow snow from paths in winter, which saves money and relieves the pathways and boardwalks from the beating that plows can mete out. The lack of plowing also allows people to enjoy cross-

country skiing and snowshoeing on Greenway paths for a few weeks each winter.

The Greenway today

By any reasonable measure, the Greenway has achieved its goals. The infrastructure is in surprisingly good shape and well-maintained. The paths are about 10 feet wide, and the stone-dust paths dry quickly after storms. The boardwalks are in excellent shape, with no sign of rotten or out-of-place boards.

This coming year, the DCR will restore Riverwalk Park in Waltham between Moody Street and Prospect Street, including riverbank stabilization, native plantings, a canoe portage, and repairs to the existing asphalt path.

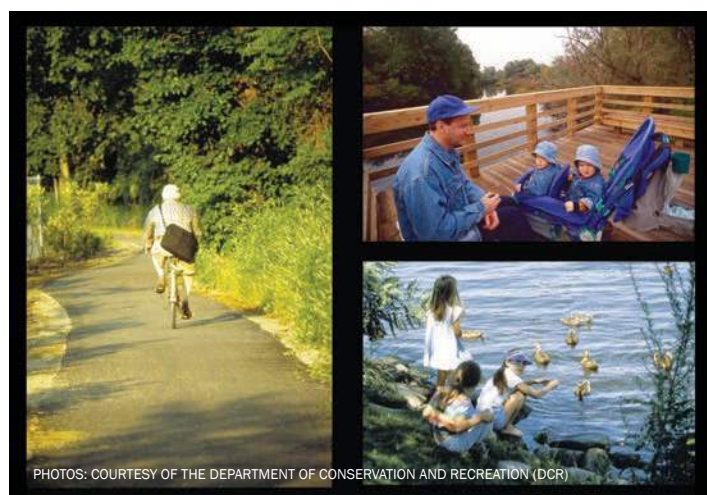


A view of part of the Greenway showing Prospect Street (arrow left) and Moody Street (arrow right) Google Maps

During a recent walk, I found very little trash or dumping, except for a few discarded Christmas trees near an apartment building. It was evident that maintenance crews had cut and removed large branches and tree trunks that had fallen across paths after recent storms. The river had overflowed its banks, but the well-designed paths remained dry just above the reach of the water.

Much of the park is natural, filled with maples, willows, and alder trees. Some field areas are being converted to wildflower meadows and pollinator gardens. In spring, it is easy to imagine these river forests and fields filled with migratory birds, butterflies, bumble bees, and other wildlife.

On a cold winter afternoon, the park was filled with people of all ages representing our diverse communities. People were enjoying the fresh air and the natural beauty of the river.



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND RECREATION (DCR)

How people use the park.

Businesses have also embraced the park. During the Greenway's 30 years, more than 750 units of housing have been built along it in Newton, Waltham, and Watertown. More than 200 additional units are under construction. Developers know that proximity to the Greenway is a selling point, and the housing enhances the tax base of local governments. Businesses also contribute to park maintenance and improvements, including mowing and planting shrubs and trees.

The DCR is encouraging developers of future apartments to include space for retail stores and restaurants, particularly with outdoor seating. Cronin's Landing and its Margaritas Mexican Restaurant abutting the Greenway along Moody Street in Waltham provide an example of what the DCR would like to see elsewhere along the river.



Cronin's Landing apartments

and extend this cooperation to other local environmental organizations, schools, and scouting groups. These groups could volunteer to help maintain or improve natural areas and infrastructure, such as boardwalks, benches and picnic areas, and could provide educational programs, nature



PHOTO: RICHARD PRIMACK

An example of a Greenway boardwalk

studies, and fundraising. The Earth Day clean-up in the Greenway is already successful, but the public could contribute much more.

Stormwater from developed areas can pollute the river and adjacent wetlands with sediments, mineral nutrients, toxic chemicals, and even sewage. DCR and abutting communities



PHOTO: RICHARD PRIMACK

Invasive plants like these are now targets of removal and replacement with native plants.

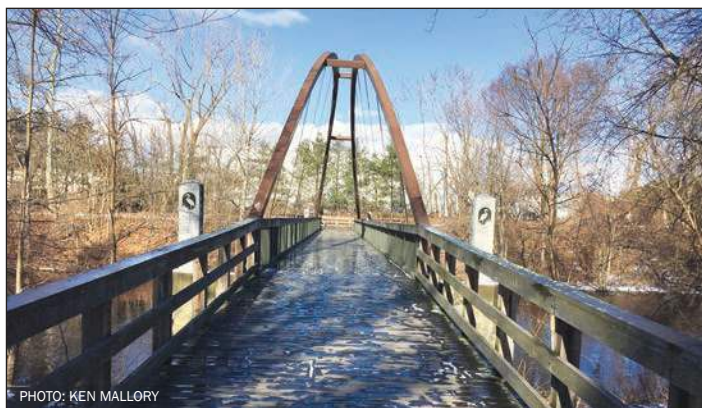
What could be better?

Even with the park in such great shape, there are under-utilized opportunities. For example, the DCR could strengthen its existing ties to the Newton Conservators

have already been making stormwater management upgrades, such as building bioengineered detention basins next to parking lots, establishing green roofs, changing to porous pavement in parking lots, and improving catch basins. New developments in the watershed should follow this example.

Infestations of non-native invasive species are choking out native plants at many Greenway locations, including extensive stands of Japanese knotweed and dense tangles of multiflora rose, bittersweet vines, and other non-native shrubs. Newton Conservators has already cooperated

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Blue Heron Bridge

with the DCR to control invasive plants in the vicinity of the Blue Heron Bridge. DCR and local community organizations could expand these efforts to reduce and control these nuisance plants over a larger area of the park.

The Charles River Greenway is already a gem in Newton. After 30 years, it is hard to imagine Newton without it. Opportunities for increasing volunteer participation, public education, and resource stewardship highlight ways that we can continue to strengthen the ties between the Greenway and our community over the next 30 years. ♦

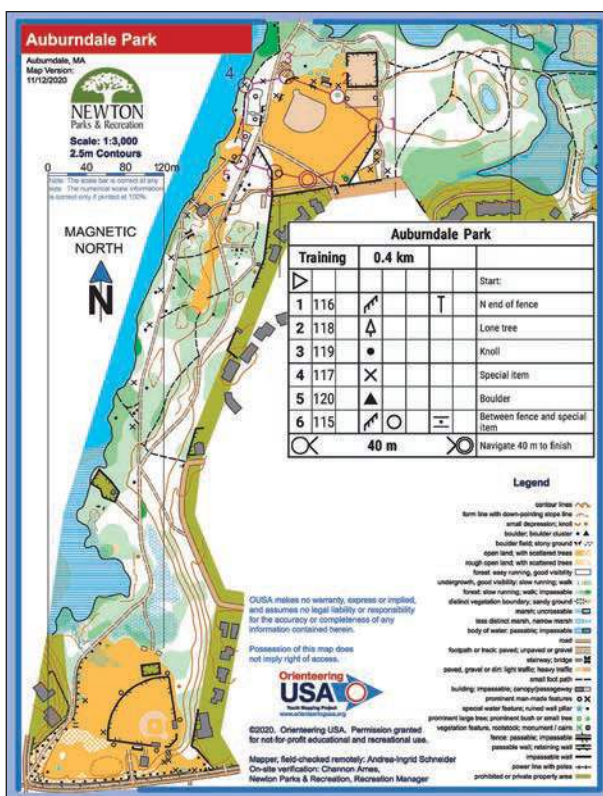
Find Yourself in Orienteering

By Channon Ames, Recreation Manager, Newton Parks, Recreation & Culture Department

Editor's note: The Conservators' directors believe it is important that those engaged in orienteering should be careful not to tramp through ecologically sensitive locations/habitats such as the "edges of ponds and streams" or into "deep woods," where it could (however unintentionally) transport the seeds or roots of invasive species into areas where those species have not already taken hold. See Jennifer Steel's article in the Fall 2023 Conservators' newsletter to learn about the need to stick to marked trails on Newton's public lands.

Orienteering began in the late 1800s in Sweden as a military exercise crossing unknown land with the aid of a map and compass. Since then, it has become a worldwide sport with national and international competitions. Participants use a detailed map to find their way from point to point, determining the best and fastest route through a pre-determined course. Being able to accurately read and follow the map aids the user in making decisions that will help to improve their overall finishing time. All maps follow an international standard, making orienteering easy to learn and participate in around the world.

While orienteering can be a competitive sport, there are also benefits for the non-competitive orienteer that help improve map reading skills while exploring the great outdoors. For the casual orienteer, orienteering is like a hike and scavenger



hunt mixed into one. Participants go at their own pace, use the map to make decisions, and plan a route to find orienteering controls. The controls are usually located on or near interesting landform features like knolls, boulders, cliffs, depressions, edges of ponds or streams, and special items, creating an exciting adventure in the woods. In more advanced courses, the controls are placed deeper in the woods making map reading and compass use a necessary skill.

Orienteering isn't just about maps, though; it can be a lifelong journey that you participate in by yourself or with family and friends. Children as young as five or six and adults well into their 80s have enjoyed the benefits of orienteering. Orienteering allows you to experience nature, exercise,

keep your mind sharp, challenge yourself, and become a better you. Learn to appreciate the natural world and all