



Westford Conservation Trust Newsletter

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→ Trust Annual Meeting 2014

The Trust Annual Meeting was held at the Westford Museum on November 6, 2014. Our guest speaker, Dr. Tom French, presented a very informative talk covering Massachusetts wildlife conservation from pre-colonial to modern times. Trust President, Ron Gemma, reviewed the Trust Activities for the past year which included the following:

- Trust ownership of 16 properties - 93 acres
- Improvements to Prospect Hill Wildlife Sanctuary with help of Eagle Scout David Gillette
- Repair of Pageant Hill gate (see related story)
- Addition of Agnew and Timberlake properties
- Review of year-round trail maintenance
- Review of multiple Eagle Scout projects
- Stream Team review
- Update on invasive species control
- Presentation of 2014 Conservation Trustee Award to Bill and Marian Harman (see photo above)



**2014 Conservation Trustee Award winners
Marian and Bill Harman**

photo courtesy A. Sylvia



Taking Stock of Westford Wildlife 2014

by Marian Harman

Winter is a good time to take stock of the wildlife reports I have received in the previous year. Each month, contributors send me reports of flora and fauna they have observed in Westford that month. I publish these reports in a monthly column called "Westford Wildlife Watch", which appears in the Westford Eagle. This column has been appearing in the paper since 1990, so we have compiled quite a lot of information about Westford's wildlife during that time. Westford friends, Mau and Maurilio Fernandes, take the data and produce charts to display the trends.



Wild Turkey - photo by the author

Most years, there are 75-90 reporters from all over town, who send in 1500-1900 different reports. Though not a scientific study, these reports and especially the trends over the 24-year period give us a great snapshot of what is happening with wildlife in Westford. Here are some of the things we have learned.

Consistent with loss of farmland in Westford, many of the birds we used to see regularly are no longer present, or are present in very low numbers. These include the American Kestrel, Bobolink, Meadowlark, Barn Owl, Whippoorwill, and Ruffed Grouse. Some bird species, such as Blue Jay, were impacted by disease some years ago, and have not rebounded to previous numbers. An alarming trend is the loss of neo-tropical migrants, those birds which migrate through Westford in the spring on their long flights from Central and South America to Maine and Canada. These include many Warbler species, Scarlet Tanagers, Thrushes, and Orioles. Birds which favor forested areas have increased. These include Cooper's Hawks, Barred Owls, Pileated Woodpeckers, and Ravens.

With climate change, several formerly southern birds have made a home here. These include the Northern Cardinal, Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Wren and Red-bellied Woodpecker. American Robins and Eastern Bluebirds are now permanent residents, where once they were not present here in the winter. The Wild Turkey and Canada Goose, though native to the area, were introduced for hunting and have now taken up permanent residence. Mammals, too, have responded to the increase in forested land in Westford, and have regained their historic territory here. These include the Eastern Coyote, Black Bear, Fisher, Bobcat, and the occasional Moose. Some mammals have been affected by disease such as Raccoons, which were nearly exterminated by rabies about ten years ago, and the Big Brown Bat, which has been attacked by a fungus which has almost exterminated them. Opossums have spread north from their traditional southern homes, and seem to be able to survive our warmer winters.



Insects such as Monarch butterflies, and several species of frogs and salamanders, which are highly sensitive to the increased use of pesticides and herbicides, have declined markedly. A program to protect vernal pools (small ponds which are only seasonally wet) in Westford has helped some of the frogs and salamanders which are dependent upon these pools for mating. Other insect pests such as the Hemlock Woolly Adelgid, and Asian Long-horned Beetle have invaded from the south and are now established here. This is also true for several invasive plants such as Asian Bittersweet, Glossy Buckthorn, Burning Bush, Japanese Barberry, Japanese Honeysuckle, Phragmites Reed, and Mile-a-minute Plant.

In 2014, the big news was Black Bears. Bears have been seen regularly in Westford for the past four years. I received 22 reports of Black Bears at feeders this year, from February until the end of October. Tom French, of Mass Fish and Wildlife, estimates that for a town of our size, we likely have only three bears. Black bears have huge territories and so roam widely. One bear was reported to have broken into a rabbit hutch and several chicken coops, until it was shot by police on Hildreth St. on October 23. This raiding of coops was unusual behavior for a black bear. Usually they have preferred the easy pickings of knocking over bird feeders.

It seems that what is most constant in Westford is change. When we moved to Westford in 1973, our fence often hosted a resting kestrel and our barn a resident barn owl. We had frequent visits from the ruffed grouse which nested in our woods. Our trash cans were raided nightly by a large raccoon family. All of these animals are no longer present on our property, and we miss them. At that time, there were no coyote, fisher, bobcat or bear in town. But now we do see all these large mammals, as well as many new birds. Most concerning to bird lovers is the precipitous decline of our warblers and thrushes. Loss of habitat, both in the northern U.S. and in South America, is most likely the cause. We should do all we can to preserve open space in Westford and to curtail the use of herbicides and pesticides which kill the caterpillars these birds need to fuel their journey, and which our local birds need to feed their young. It will be exciting for wildlife watchers to see what the next decade has in store for us. Please report any flora or fauna you see in Westford. You can write me at 10 Chamberlain Rd., call me at 692-3907, or e-mail me at mariancharman@verizon.net.



Restoration of the Gate at Pageant Field

by Lenny Palmer

In 1992, Priscilla Elliot donated 9.6 acres of land on Hildreth Street to the Westford Conservation Trust, now the Prospect Hill Wildlife Sanctuary. The area is comprised of a wooded slope that runs up to near the top of Prospect Hill and on the north portion an open, one acre area, Pageant Field. In April 1929, the 200th Anniversary events for the Town of Westford were held in the field with the spectators sitting on the then unforested hillside. In recent years, local farmer and land manager, George Fletcher, had grown corn on the field. Today the area is managed by the Trust as a pollinator/wildflower field.



The Gate at Pageant Field

When the Trust acquired the property, the gate to the field was in total disrepair with bent, rusted and broken sections and some of the cast iron rods embedded in a maple tree. The Trust had long discussed attempting to restore the gate, but it took Town Moderator Ellen Harde and local activists known for getting things done, to initiate the repairs. In the fall of 2013, Ellen contacted craftsman Mark Donahue who had previously worked on the horse troughs on the Town Common. Mark looked at the mess and, much to our amazement, assured the Trust that it could be resurrected. He extracted the gate from the tree, found the broken pieces and moved the twisted mass to his shop where he spent many hours hammering, welding, burnishing and repainting the iron. During the summer and fall of 2014, the gate was installed and the final painting completed in November 2014.

The gate now is fully functional, swinging on its original +/-100 year old hinges. During most of the year the gate sections are closed, mostly to show off the graceful cast iron to the folks driving down Hildreth Street. Entrance to the field and trails is through a newly established break in the wall next to the gate. During the snowy months, the gate is left open to prevent damage from the heavy, salted snow left by the street plows. The final step in the restoration was the installation of a sign commemorating the 1929 celebration.



Land and Trails Maintenance by Bill Harman

There is currently an active group of Land and Trails volunteers who visit conservation land areas to monitor and take care of these wonderful places. They pick up litter, although usually litter on roads is much more common than litter on trails. The volunteers also monitor the land areas and report to the Conservation Commission or the Conservation Trust if they see anything that should be corrected. In one example, they recently reported that a black plastic silt fence has been left in-place for many years after Rome Drive was constructed.



Peace Trail, Trailhead

One group of volunteers is regularly going out every Tuesday morning, and because it happens every week, the group visits a wide variety of areas all over town. Recently the Tuesday group went to the Peace Trail, starting out from the trail-head on Boston Road - see accompanying photo. They installed one of the 4x4 posts which are now consistently marking trails around town. These posts were created as part of an Eagle Scout project by Ian McBeth. The Tuesday group also identified the suitability of a TRAIL PARKING sign at the trail-head, to help people who may be unfamiliar with that area to feel comfortable parking there and using the trail. Beau Walsh made the parking sign shown in the photo, which he did by routing the words into a white board made of a long-lasting construction material. Beau is a skilled carpenter who has the ability to create freehand routed lettering. Many of his white TRAIL signs can be seen around town.

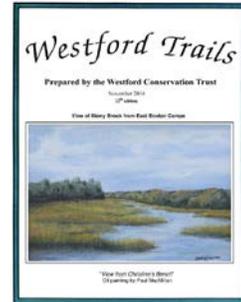
The photo also shows the beginning of the Peace Trail as it leaves the parking area, where the trail stands out clearly as a mowed strip, separate from the surrounding field of sumac. This neat appearance is the result of a mowing program by Steve Smith. Steve has been trailering his John Deere mower to this place and to other short trail sections which are in direct sunlight where vegetation growth is very vigorous, especially in the Spring.

The Peace Trail goes east from this trail-head, leading to a charming woodland with wetlands on both sides of the trail, really good for birding. The trail includes several bridges and several sections of long boardwalk, which were constructed by Boy Scouts over a number of years (Paul Berard, Sean Dilworth, Mike Basmaji, and Adam Holub). If you haven't been on this trail yet, we recommend it, and we recommend bringing binoculars. An accurate trail map is available by [clicking here](#).



New! Westford Trails Booklet 2014 Edition Available For Purchase

The 12th edition of *Westford Trails* has just been published. The booklet includes several GPS-based topographic maps with accurate renderings of trails, streams, ponds, marshes, roads, and other landmarks. This 56-page edition has many new maps, new text and all new artwork. Most of the artwork was created by Westford Academy art students. The booklet is available for \$5.00 at Roudenbush and the Town Clerk's office. Many maps in the trail guide can also be found on our website by [clicking here](#).



Trail Walk Schedule - February thru April 2015

Guided trail walks are open to the public on the first Saturday of every month from 9 a.m.-10:30 a.m., rain or shine. All walks are free of charge and no sign-up is required.

Acker Land - February 7

Come and explore the Acker Land with Westford Conservation Trust Director, Rich Strazdas. This is the first parcel donated to the Conservation Trust. The TWA railroad and Stony Brook shape this surprisingly wild property. Where else can you see a cattle pass?! Park across Depot Street at the entrance to Stony Brook Conservation Land. Young children and dogs on leash are welcome. For more information call Rich at 978-692-2057.



Burns Hill walkers Nov. 2014

Emmet Land From Texas Road - March 7

Join Westford Conservation Trust Associate Director, Lenny Palmer, who will lead a walk on the beautiful Emmet land to Nashoba Pond. Meet at the Richard Emmet Conservation Land sign at the end of Texas Road. Walk is hilly and rocky in places. Wear sturdy footwear appropriate to the weather. Dogs on leash welcome. For more information call Lenny at 978-392-9876

O'Brien Farm - April 4

A Westford Conservation Trust member will lead a walk on the 23-acre, recently protected O'Brien Farm property on Vose Road. The trails wind through various habitats including wooded upland, open meadow, marsh land and along a year-round brook. Park in the lot on Vose Road near the junction with Steeple Chase Circle. For more information call Lenny at 978-392-9876

