

# in the mainstream

Norwalk River Watershed Association  
Fall 2020 Newsletter

## Join Us to Save Comstock Brook!

As the Comstock Brook meanders southward from its headwaters in North Wilton, the stream is cool and clear, with curves and snags and eddies that create the perfect habit for native brook trout. Formerly plentiful, our native trout has been on the decline for over a century, falling victim to the impacts of industrialization, development and pollution, among other insults.

According to Jeff Yates, Conservation Chair of the Mianus Chapter of Trout Unlimited, “this is one of the last best places for native brook trout. They are the only native fish in our watershed, and Comstock Brook is the only place you can find them with any regularity.”

The presence of the trout isn’t just good news for fishermen, it’s a sign that Comstock Brook is in good health – at least in its northern reaches. Brook trout, says Yates, are “like the canary in the coal mine. They need cold, clear water.” So, find a native brook trout and you know you’ve found a healthy stream.

But the picture changes dramatically once the Brook hits an intake valve at the dam just north of Middlebrook Farm Rd. Here, brook water is funneled into a pipe that delivers it to the Rock Lake and City Lake reservoirs, which are maintained by South Norwalk Electric & Water (SNEW). Four to five months of the year there isn’t enough water left in the stream to maintain a flow southward. The Brook comes to an abrupt halt.

This creates an aquatic form of habitat fragmentation. Brook trout and other aquatic life are stuck, forced into smaller and smaller pockets of water. And this in turn leads to decreased genetic diversity and makes them vulnerable to being wiped out by a single major event.

During periods when all the water is being drained from Comstock Brook, any water flowing south of Middlebrook Farm Road comes almost entirely from runoff from land around the brook, most of which at this point is residential.



Comstock Brook near Millstone Rd, north of Middlebrook Farm Rd



... and south of Middlebrook Farm Rd dam and water intake valve



When it rains, what's on the land washes into the Brook. That includes fertilizer, pesticides, herbicides, and pet waste from residential properties, and oil, sand and road salt from roadways. All this is compounded by the impact of private wells, which draw water from the underground aquifers that would otherwise feed the stream.

The problems Comstock Brook faces are representative of those faced by thousands of streams throughout the country. Jeff Yates summarizes these threats as follows:

- Dewatering – like the example above of the pipe diverting water to reservoirs.
- Dams – there are over 30 dams of various sizes on Comstock Brook alone.
- Degradation – loss of healthy wooded buffer zone along riverbanks, channel alteration, lack of tree canopy to provide shade, and erosion, among other things.
- Development – and all the things that it brings: paved surfaces, storm drains, thermal pollution, road salt, pesticides, and other chemicals.

Add to this the impact of climate change and you have a rather grim scenario.

However, there is good news. For starters, SNEW takes its role as steward of the land it owns around Comstock Brook very seriously. The entity is mandated to supply water for much of Norwalk and some of South Wilton, so while it is responsible for funneling water away when there's demand, the property it owns has been maintained as forested

## Native Plants to the Rescue! Plant Highbush Blueberry Not Burning Bush

Native Highbush Blueberry equals Burning Bush in fall color but also offers us and local wildlife a bushel of benefits, blueberries included!



**Native: Highbush Blueberry**  
(*Vaccinium corymbosum*)

Photo: Rutgers.edu



**Invasive: Burning Bush**  
(*Euonymus alatus*)

Photo: Oregonstate.edu

green space. That green space has helped protect the northern reaches of the Brook. "We wouldn't have brook trout in Comstock Brook at all without SNEW," says Jeff Yates. And by 2029, SNEW will have to meet new minimum streamflow standards requiring releases of some water all year below the Middlebrook Farm Rd dam.

The other cause for hope is that we as watershed residents have it within our power to protect and even restore Comstock Brook. Here's what you can do to help:

1. **Get informed.** Listen to the webinar series on Comstock Brook presented by NRWA, Wilton Library, Wilton Land Conservation Trust, and Trout Unlimited Mianus Chapter. You can find all webinars at [norwalkriver.org](http://norwalkriver.org). And check for updates on the NRWA Facebook page.
2. **Manage your property with care.** What we put on our lawns and in our gardens will end up in our waterways and ultimately in Long Island Sound. And consider

reducing your lawns and choosing more native plants. Visit [pollinator-pathway.org](http://pollinator-pathway.org) for plant lists and lawn replacement tips.

3. **Conserve water.** According to Aquarion Water Company, 40% of the water used in southwestern Connecticut is used outdoors, with that number rising to 70% in summer. Learn how to cut down on water use at [norwalkriver.org](http://norwalkriver.org).
4. **Support local conservation groups like NRWA, Trout Unlimited and Wilton Land Conservation Trust**, all of which are dedicated to protecting and preserving green spaces, wildlife habitat and waterways.
5. **Spread the word.** Urge your friends and neighbors to learn more about Comstock Brook and the Norwalk River Watershed. Conservation requires all of us to act. And together we can turn the tide!

To keep up-to-date about Comstock Brook, visit [norwalkriver.org](http://norwalkriver.org) or our Facebook page.

**We Need Your Support on September 29<sup>th</sup>!**  
**Please Attend a Virtual Public Hearing on a Project to Raise**  
**New Canaan's Grupes Reservoir Dam with the Potential to Wreak**  
**Havoc on Adjoining Habitat**



NRWA, along with New Canaan Land Trust (NCLT), is encouraging public participation in an online hearing at 3 pm on September 29<sup>th</sup> about plans for significant construction at the Grupes Reservoir along the Silvermine River in New Canaan. The Silvermine is a Norwalk

River tributary. The reservoir is familiar to many as the waterway that runs along NCLT's Browne Wildlife Sanctuary on Valley Road. The proposed plans, submitted by the First Taxing District Water Dept. of Norwalk, include raising the height of the Grupes Reservoir Dam by 4

feet and constructing 1500 feet of berms and walls along the eastern shore of the reservoir.

NRWA and NCLT, petitioners in the hearing, are concerned about the potential negative environmental impacts of the project. The construction of the berms and walls will necessitate the permanent clearing of over 400 native trees and shrubs which comprise important riverbank habitat. The barrier will also disconnect wetlands and streams at Browne Sanctuary from the reservoir. The application, as submitted to the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) by the First Taxing District Water Dept. of Norwalk, does not address potential impacts to the eastern riverbank. We are seeking alternative plans that protect the wetlands and watercourses in the vicinity.

We, and many of you, have petitioned DEEP to hold this public hearing so that we may make a case for the addition of a more in depth review of the application. DEEP is conducting this hearing and the public is invited to attend.

**The link to join can be found on the CT DEEP Calendar at [www.ct.gov/deep/calendar](http://www.ct.gov/deep/calendar) or at [NorwalkRiver.org](http://NorwalkRiver.org)**

**Membership Form**

Becoming a member helps NRWA continue to protect local water quality, hiking trails, and wildlife habitats.

**Riparian Society**

Steward \$1000+  
Protector \$500 – \$999  
Patron \$100 – \$499

**Membership**

Supporter \$50 – \$99  
Friend \$30 – \$49  
Other \$\_\_\_\_\_

☐ My company has a matching gift program  
(company name) \_\_\_\_\_

**Donate Online at [NorwalkRiver.org](http://NorwalkRiver.org)**

Or mail your tax-deductible Annual Membership gift of \$\_\_\_\_\_ to  
NRWA, Inc. PO Box 7114, Wilton, CT 06897. Please make check payable to NRWA, Inc.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to receive updates and events info. My email is: \_\_\_\_\_



## Upcoming Events

**Saturday, September 26, 10AM-1PM.**

### **River Cleanup for International Coastal Cleanup Day.**

Volunteers needed to help clean up the riverbank along East Avenue in Norwalk. We will weigh the collected trash, categorize it, and report it to the Ocean Conservancy to help them track and eliminate ocean debris as part of International Coastal Cleanup 2020. Ocean Conservancy's annual International Coastal Cleanup (ICC) is the largest volunteer effort of its kind.

Meet at Norwalk River Rowing docks at 1 Moody's Lane, Norwalk. Waterproof footwear, long pants, and gloves advised. Rain date: Sunday Sept. 27. For more information, contact NRWA at 877-NRWA-INFO or [info@norwalkriver.org](mailto:info@norwalkriver.org).

*Hosted by NRWA, Norwalk River Rowing, Surfrider, Skip the Plastic Norwalk, Cleaner CT Coalition, and Harbor Watch at Earthplace.*

### **Volunteers Needed for Masked, Socially Distanced Outdoor Projects**

**The Ridgefield Pollinator Pathway** is working on a 3-year meadow restoration project at town-owned McKeon Farm. Contact us at [info@pollinator-pathway.org](mailto:info@pollinator-pathway.org) to join!

**The Norwalk Pollinator Pathway** weed warriors are restoring the gardens at Oyster Shell Park on Saturdays and Wednesdays, 9-11AM. For more info and weather cancellations, contact: [theperennialgardener@gmail.com](mailto:theperennialgardener@gmail.com)

**Webinar coming December 8, 7PM: Restoring the Norwalk River: Working to Mediate 200 Years of Impacts.** Join us for the fourth in our series with the Wilton Library on what we can all do to restore water quality (and quantity) in Comstock Brook. Check [norwalkriver.org](http://norwalkriver.org) for details soon.