

in the mainstream

Norwalk River Watershed Association
Fall 2021 Newsletter

Envisioning the Future

There is more good news about efforts to open the Norwalk River! After Norwalk removed the first dam upriver from the Sound in 2018, we cheered. The removal of the 150-year-old Flock Process dam meant spawning fish could make their way 3.5 miles up from Norwalk Harbor to Wilton's Merwin Meadows park. Now we are cheering again because Wilton is working with Save the Sound and Trout Unlimited to take down the Dana Dam at Merwin Meadows, which was built in the 1940s to create an ice-skating pond for the Dana family. Take a walk along the Norwalk River Valley Trail at the park, and you can see the work happening now.

The next dam upriver, at Canondale, breached in 2018 during a heavy storm. That means once the Dana Dam is gone, migratory fish will have more than 20 miles of open water to swim before they hit the dams in Georgetown. This major restoration of free-flowing river will help usher in a new era of ecological health and biodiversity for the river.



Photo courtesy of Jayme Soyak



Above, the Dana Dam today, and below, an artistic rendering by Save the Sound of the area once the dam is gone and restoration work is complete.

There is more news to report on dams, however, and this time it's not so good. The First Taxing District of Norwalk, which operates four drinking-water reservoirs along the Silvermine river

will be raising the height of its Grupes Reservoir dam in New Canaan by 4 feet and building a 1500-foot wall along the eastern shore to keep water from potentially spilling around the dam. The dam was built in 1871, and needs repairs, but the decision to erect a wall along the bank, diverting the flow of water from an adjacent wetland and removing 1.5 acres of wooded riverbank, will significantly degrade wildlife habitat. NRWA intervened to press for consideration of alternative plans that would have spared the riverbank. However, we lost this battle, and CT DEEP has granted the water company a permit to proceed. You can take a last look at the area before it is altered by hiking through the New Canaan Land Trust property, Browne Sanctuary on Valley Road.

Another battle is playing out over the dam at the very start of the river, the flood-control dam in Ridgefield at the Great Swamp. This dam was installed

after the flood of 1955 and is now at risk of overtopping and failing in an extreme storm event. The solution: to raise it or to remove it. A cost analysis by the state has resulted in a recommendation to remove it. One change that has led to the re-evaluation of the need for the dam, according to Save the Sound engineer, Gwen MacDonald, is that “the modeling that calculates how the swamp would attenuate the flooding didn’t exist in the 1970s, but now we can measure how that swamp works as a sponge for absorbing potential flood waters.”

We have been underestimating the Great Swamp in Ridgefield.

Connecticut is the most heavily dammed state per square mile, with over 4000 dams. These aging structures coupled with the heavier storm events resulting from climate change are creating questions about how to balance flood safety, the needs of industry and residents, and the environment. NRWA advocates for a balanced approach that includes prioritizing environmental protections.

Thank you to the Watershed community for supporting the opening of our river. We invite you to join us in welcoming back the shad, alewife, and even the lamprey eel—spotted recently! We all gain from the ecological benefits that come with a natural free flow of water and healthy vegetated riverbanks.

Welcome Jayme Soyak! Our New TerraCorps Member

Hello! I am thrilled to be working with NRWA as the Community Engagement and Land Stewardship Coordinator through TerraCorps! TerraCorps is an AmeriCorps affiliated environmental nonprofit centered around land equity and the strengthening of community land ownership. I will be serving both as a Community Engagement Coordinator and Land Stewardship Coordinator. This means I will be assisting with programming, events, community outreach and education, as well as hands-on stewardship of the land, including native plant restoration, invasive species control, and GIS mapping. Thanks to supporters like you, NRWA has developed a number of amazing programs that engage residents with the watershed and surrounding land. Over my 11-month service term with NRWA, I hope to expand these efforts by increasing opportunities for volunteerism, engagement and education.

I grew up in Ridgefield and spent my childhood hiking the area and playing in the woods, all the while learning about the area and nurturing my curiosity of the earth. The protection of nature and wildlife of this area is not only part of my long-term goals, but is rooted deeply in the way that I was raised. I earned my Bachelor’s Degree in Geography at the University of Delaware and developed a passion for the intersectionality between environmental conservation and social justice. I continued these studies in pursuing a Master’s Degree in Resource Administration, International Sustainable Development and Climate Change through Antioch University. I am passionate about the environment and the earth and my goal is to be a catalyst for positive environmental and humanitarian change around the world. I’m elated to be taking my next steps with Terracorps and the Norwalk River Watershed Association, especially since I am able to serve so close to home.



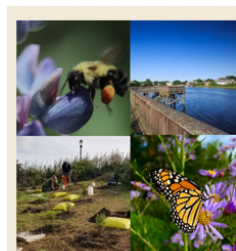
Introducing *Friends of Oyster Shell Park*

Many of you have joined us in our on-going work to restore the gardens and riverbank at Oyster Shell Park, just up the river from the Maritime Aquarium in Norwalk. To increase the impact volunteers are having there, we are formally launching the new Friends of Oyster Shell Park!

The Friends will be responsible for restoring, maintaining, and enhancing the park’s gardens and riverbank and to raise awareness about the importance of the park to the health of Norwalk Harbor and as habitat for birds, pollinators, and other wildlife. Work is guided by Norwalk’s Master Plan for the park and is done in collaboration with the City Rec & Parks Dept.

The all-volunteer organization relies on donations through the Norwalk River Watershed Association to fund cleanups, planting opportunities and educational programs.

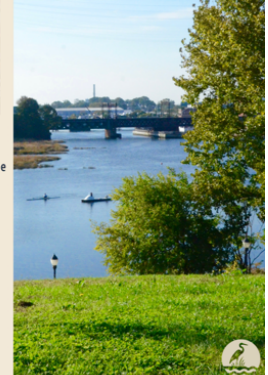
Join us! More information at NorwalkRiver.org.



Habitat Restoration

Much of the wildlife habitat of the Norwalk River Watershed—native shoreline grasses and shrubs, wildflower meadows, and forests—has been altered or destroyed by development. To help restore the landscape, Friends volunteers plant the native plants that have evolved along with the local wildlife to provide them with the food and shelter they need. Oyster Shell Park is part of the Norwalk Pollinator Pathway, a connected corridor of safe habitat for pollinators.

Friends of Oyster Shell Park



How to Prepare Your Yard for Winter – Leave the Leaves!

This fall, consider leaving the leaves. One of the most valuable things you can do to support pollinators and other wildlife is to provide them with the winter cover they need to nest, lay eggs, and shelter. Though some pollinators migrate, most stay in your yard and overwinter in dirt patches, old wood, hollow reeds, and leaf piles.

Leaving the leaves does not necessarily mean ignoring them and leaving them where they fell. You can move them to places where they are out of the way, will not kill the grass, and will still help wildlife. Consider raking leaves into areas around trees or using them as winter mulch for perennials or to cover garden beds. A thick layer of leaves provides additional insulation against cold weather and can protect newly planted perennials. A thin layer of leaves can actually help turf grass, too. Fallen leaves are nature's free fertilizer and provide valuable organic matter. They have the same



The renowned gardener and designer of New York City's High Line, Piet Oudolf, celebrates the beauty of winter seed heads left standing in his film Five Seasons. The image above is from Oudolf's winter gardens.

weed suppression and moisture retention properties of shredded wood mulch, and they're free!

Keep in mind if you decide to mow leaves, that shredded leaves will not provide the same cover as whole ones, and you may be destroying eggs, caterpillars, and chrysalises along with the leaves. Gentle raking is a better option until spring.

What You Can Do

- Leave the seed heads for birds to eat over the winter
- Leave the leaves where possible to shelter pollinators
- Leave piles of rocks, branches, and dead wood to shelter bees and other wildlife
- Leave some bare ground for ground-nesting native bees

Join us in honoring the memory of James Bartley Jr.

NRWA Treasurer and devoted protector of the Norwalk River, Norwalk Harbor, Stamford Harbor and Long Island Sound. We will miss him very much.

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

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: _____

A HUGE Thank You!

Thank you to The Nature Conservancy's Community Resilience Building Program, to the City of Norwalk, and to our amazing volunteers from Winston Prep, Barcelona Restaurant, Warby Parker and the Norwalk Community for helping us plant 35 trees, 133 shrubs, 75 wildflowers and 300 grasses at Oyster Shell Park and Woodward Avenue Park. This project is part of NRWA's ongoing efforts to connect the Pollinator Pathway and improve water quality and climate resilience in South Norwalk.

Thank you to Xerces Society and One Tree Planted for grants for trees and wildflowers along the Norwalk River Valley Trail in Wilton at Sharp Hill. Thank you to the volunteers from Crane Co, the New Canaan Land Trust and the Wilton community. These plantings aid in the land restoration, improve water quality and provide pollinator pathway habitat in Wilton.



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