

Estabrook Woods: An Unusual Story

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The Estabrook Woods is one of Concord's largest intact natural areas, with over 1400 acres of contiguous protected land (and more in neighboring Carlisle). But many people who visit the Woods don't realize that most of the land is privately owned and protected from development as a result of a 60 year collaboration to support a biological reserve for research and education.

How this came about is an unusual story.

At the heart of Estabrook Woods is a 672 acre woodland preserve that is affiliated with Harvard University's Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ) and its Department of Organismic and Evolutionary Biology. The preserve, administered as part of a research facility based in Bedford known as The Concord Field Station, was established in the 1960s as a result of the vision of two Harvard professors: Dr. Ernst Mayr, then the Director of the MCZ, and Dr. Charles Lyman, then Curator of Mammology. They worked with landowners in Concord and Carlisle to acquire contiguous land to be used by faculty, graduate, and undergraduate students for teaching and research in the environmental sciences, zoology, ecology, and animal behavior. Their efforts were aided by generous Concord residents, property owners, The Nature Conservancy, and a grant from the Ford Foundation.

In support of the field station, the Towns of Concord and Carlisle, the land trusts of Concord and Carlisle, private owners, the Trustees of Reservations, and thoughtful visitors have worked together since the 1960s to protect and steward additional land around the field station.

On the Concord side of the town line, the Town of Concord owns and manages the 100 acre Punkatasset Conservation Land, directly adjacent to Harvard's preserve. The Concord Land Conservation Trust owns and cares for three parcels, the largest of which is the 59 acre Chamberlin Woods land, providing access to the Woods from Lowell Road. The rest of the land in the Woods in Concord - nearly 400 acres -- is privately held by many separate landowners who

have agreed to forgo or limit development and to protect particular conservation values through deed restrictions or conservation restrictions.

On this private land, the granting of public access varies. Some private land owners have given general or limited and specific permission for access across their property. From the beginning, Harvard has generously permitted public access on its land for compatible recreation, so long as use remains modest and quiet and does not interfere with research. Punkatasset and the Land Trust properties are open to the public with use regulations.

What does this all mean? When you or I enter the Estabrook Woods, we might think we are in “public conservation land” but the fact is that on our hike we might well be passing through land held by several different owners – including Harvard University and private landowners.

Recent conflicts over parking, dogs, and visitor impacts – particularly at the end of Estabrook Road in Concord – led to the creation of the Estabrook Woods Access Study Committee. We will make recommendations this fall about how best to provide adequate and safe parking at access points, and how to address other impacts from visitor use.

On June 13, we hosted a well-attended public hearing. From what we heard at the hearing, and in the many pieces of correspondence that we have received, it is clear that residents care deeply about the Estabrook Woods and value its tranquility and beauty. Some excellent management suggestions were offered.

Over the course of the summer, we will continue to gather public input as we work towards our recommendations, and we welcome your perspective. We are especially interested in solutions that:

- continue to welcome visitors to the Woods
- respect the rights and generosity of landowners
- support stewardship of the Woods and its purpose for conservation, research and education.

As a committee, we are very optimistic that these goals can be achieved without resorting to costly lawsuits and that the legacy of the Estabrook Woods will be honored and enjoyed by the many who treasure it.

You can learn about our committee (and view a recording of our public hearing) by visiting the Town's webpage at www.concordma.gov. The Committee welcomes public comment on potential solutions to issues related to parking and visitors in the Estabrook Woods. All emails will be part of the public record. You can contact us at estabrookcommittee@concordma.gov.

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Co-Chairs

The Estabrook Woods Access Study Committee