

A photograph of a park with trees in autumn foliage and a wooden walkway in the foreground. The trees are mostly yellow and orange, with some green still visible. The sky is a clear blue. The walkway is made of wooden planks and is partially obscured by tall grasses in the foreground.

PLACE

Fall/Winter 2026

Brookline GreenSpace Alliance
is a non-profit membership organization
dedicated to the enhancement of open
space in Brookline by supporting residents
in caring for their green spaces.

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Cover photo: Hall's Pond Sanctuary, John Shreffler

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Birding In Brookline

Brookline can be regarded as a hub for birdwatching, in the sense that Brookline has several good birding areas within its borders as well along the Boston boundaries. What makes a good birding area? I think of three requirements:

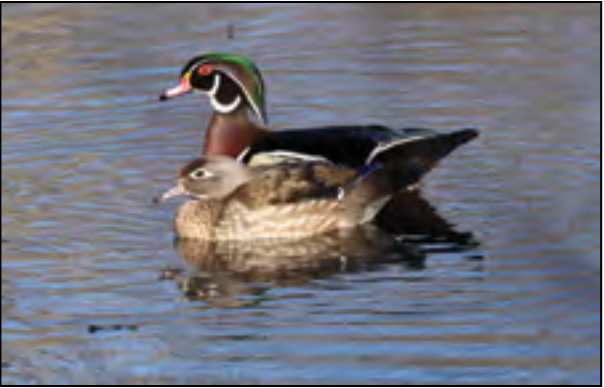
Water of some sort (pond, river, stream);

“Edges” between different habitats, such as forest and pond, meadow and forest, swamp and upland; and

“Unmanicured” areas: unkempt tangles of vegetation.

These combinations provide a secure habitat as well as good feeding opportunities for a variety of birds which you might or might not see or hear in your own yard.

Hall's Pond located at the back of Amory Park, is exemplary for these qualities. It is also small and compact, thus easily covered in a short time. With several good observation points, many birds can be seen in a short time. And the greater the time spent on a visit, the more likely you are to have unusual and satisfying sightings. With an eBird app list of 171 species identified here over the years, it is probably the most productive site in Brookline. (eBird: <https://ebird.org/hotspot/L209594/recent-checklists>). During spring migration, it compares very favorably with larger areas like Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge and Millenium Park in West Roxbury.



Wood Duck. Photo by Amelia Szymkowicz



Green Heron. Photo by Amelia Szymkowicz

Anywhere in Brookline, looking overhead may yield views of Red-tailed Hawks and Turkey Vultures, as well as summer's omnipresent, chittering Chimney Swifts, scooping up flying insects. Even at Coolidge Corner in recent years, one could sometimes

President's Message

The Tree Team of the Brookline chapter of Mothers Out Front recently launched a website (brooklinetrees.org) that features images and descriptions of some of the favorite trees of Brookline residents. I encourage you to visit the website to learn more about Brookline's trees and why people love them.

The stories that Brookline residents post about their favorite trees reveal that trees elicit emotional attachments, lending further support to studies that find that trees enhance physical and mental health.

There are many more reasons to love and cherish trees—especially urban trees.

Trees in urban areas—along streets, around public and private buildings, and in pocket parks—benefit the people who live near them. Urban trees lower temperatures in “heat islands” by providing shade and cooling the air. Trees manage stormwater and reduce the risk of flooding. Some rain is absorbed by tree leaves before it reaches the ground. Tree roots soak up even more water and also prevent erosion. Trees absorb air pollution. The best place for them to do this is in urban areas where pollution from vehicle emissions and other sources fills the air.

In addition to enhancing the quality of life in the areas where they grow, urban trees play a particularly important role in fighting climate change. Research by Boston University Professor Lucy Hutyra indicates that urban trees absorb much more carbon dioxide than their rural and woodland counterparts.

In most cases, mature urban trees are best at improving the quality of life, building resiliency in the face of climate change, and fighting climate change.

Unfortunately, in many urban areas of Brookline there are relatively few trees, and the existing trees—including mature trees—are vulnerable or endangered. Brookline's Urban Forest Climate Resiliency Master Plan documents the limited or shrinking tree canopy in the town's most densely-populated areas, including neighborhoods around North Brookline, Coolidge Corner, and Brookline Village that are often environmental justice areas.

Preserving Brookline's urban trees will require a multi-pronged strategy, as described in the article that Urban Forestry Manager Jack Schleifer has contributed to this issue of PLACE.

The Town's Tree Preservation Bylaw protects trees on private property and is an essential component of this strategy. In Brookline's most densely-populated areas, there is not enough public open space to plant lots of trees. Preserving the urban forest in these areas requires protecting private trees. Fortunately, the Proposition 2½ override approved by Brookline's voters in May 2026 includes funding for two new staff positions to help implement the Tree Preservation Bylaw.

The Town's Front Yard Tree Planting Program is another way that Brookline attempts to increase the number of trees on private property. The Town will provide, plant, and help maintain trees in front yards at no cost to the property owner. The Tree Planting Committee is seeking locations to plant trees, particularly in neighborhoods that have a sparse tree canopy. (<https://www.brooklinema.gov/2074/Front-Yard-Tree-Planting-Program>)

Brookline also needs to invest in planting and maintaining public trees. The annual appropriation for trees in the Capital Improvement Program must be sufficient to expand and maintain Brookline's tree canopy. When parks and playgrounds are renovated—particularly in Brookline's most urban areas—the number of trees should be increased. More of Brookline's Community Preservation Act funds should be devoted to trees.

Above all, we need to embrace the idea that urban trees should be a high priority and not an afterthought as Brookline pursues other worthy goals such as adding housing, improving roadways, and enhancing accessibility.

Sean Lynn-Jones
Sean Lynn-Jones is President of BGSA

Continued pn page 8

Engineering a Natural Landscape:
Water Infrastructure at Hall’s Pond

Descriptions of the various green spaces in Brookline often use the term “natural” in their characterizations. Brookline’s official town website describes Hall’s Pond, for example, as “one of only two natural ponds remaining in Brookline” and also notes, “While most of the land and water within the sanctuary have been left in a natural state, there is a formal garden that was planted shortly after the turn of the century and cultivated ever since.” However, the use of the term “natural” misleads people into thinking that our green spaces are pristine, untouched, primordial or at least preindustrial. That characterization masks the considerable capital investment and on-going labor necessary to sustain our green spaces. I look at water infrastructure in the establishment of the Hall’s Pond Sanctuary as a glimpse into the effort expended over decades to cultivate the illusion of nature.

Hall’s Pond did not start out as the one-acre pond that it is today. Prior to European settlement, it was part of a massive Atlantic White Cedar swamp that extended across much of northeast Brookline. The area was subjected to tidal flooding twice daily as seawater washed up the Charles River. It was referred to in early letters and maps simply as “the marshes.” As European Colonists migrated into the area, primarily to escape overcrowded Boston, they harvested the Atlantic White Cedars, highly valued for their rot-resistant wood, and made them into shingles, fences, boats, barrels, storage chests and other goods. Two major water infrastructure projects then fundamentally changed the landscape.

The first was the Back Bay Mill Dam, constructed from 1818–1821, which was intended to use the differential between the high and low tides of the Charles River to generate power. While the power-generation project failed, one result of the endeavor was a land bridge, now called Beacon Street, that connected Boston to Brookline, previously accessible only via present-day Route 9. Real estate values throughout Northeast Brookline skyrocketed and a housing development boom began.

The second major water infrastructure project was the Charles River Dam, completed in 1910, which ended the tidal flooding. Water in the Charles River was thereafter maintained at a constant fixed level and northeast Brookline became even more attractive for real estate developers. Marshland was filled by leveling hills. Roads, houses, water mains, and sewers were constructed.

What is now called Hall’s Pond shrunk to approximately one acre in size. It was replenished not by Charles River tidal floods, as previously, but by road run-off from throughout North Brookline. Heavy rainfall resulted in regular flooding that also covered present-day Amory Playground, which had been purchased by the town in 1903 and filled repeatedly with landfill to keep the playing fields above the water table.

The town invested considerably in water infrastructure to keep Amory

Playground in use. In 1916, a sewer and surface water drain was installed over the Freeman Street Extension to Commonwealth Avenue. In 1948, a drainage system was installed throughout the 110-acre watershed to direct run-off into Hall’s Pond essentially transforming it into a water filtration site. A dam was also installed in Hall’s Pond in 1948 to prevent flooding into the playground. The dam was insufficient, so in 1956, an overflow weir was added.



The 1974–1977 town purchase of Hall’s Pond and Amory Woods led to additional projects, including adding marshland between Amory Playground and Hall’s Pond; relocating the outlet pipe for the drainage system; combining Hall’s Pond with Amory Woods; and building a boardwalk around the pond. The water infrastructure projects fundamentally changed Hall’s Pond and the surrounding land.

The quality of the water in Hall’s Pond, as a result of the changes, has been an on-going concern. With the lowest elevation in Northeast Brookline, Hall’s Pond has been infiltrated by run-off from every construction project, roadway and private property in the watershed. It also served as an official town garbage dump for decades in the early 1900s.

Mosquito-eradication projects in the 1920s led to the introduction of non-native carp into the pond which have thrived to the present day. A water quality study conducted in 1986 led to recommendations for many improvements including native plantings and removal of invasives.

In 2007, additional water quality concerns led the town to install a solar-powered aeration system in the pond that sends bubbles up through the water column at night to prevent the formation of bacterial mats. There have been multiple calls to DPW about suspected monster-type creatures in the pond when power outages disrupt the timer on the system.

The many decades of infrastructure investments continued in 2025–2026 with the restoration of the boardwalks around the pond and in Amory Woods and with new drainage and plantings to control run-off from the parking lot. On-going projects include planting native plants, removing invasive species and removing garbage left daily in the pond sanctuary. The capital and human labor investments have been tremendous. While it is nice to think of the pond as “natural,” its naturalness is, in fact, a massive and ongoing human undertaking to cultivate a place of respite from the even more unnatural surrounding landscape that is urban North Brookline.

Ann Frechette,
Co-President Emerita,
Friends of Hall’s Pond



Above: The Watershed that feeds Hall’s Pond
At left: Hall’s Pond in fall
Below: Hall’s Pond in winter
Photos by John Shreffler



The size of the original Cedar Swamp in 1640, overlaid on modern street grid.

Damming the Charles



Photo source: <http://www.bostonhistory.com/apocryphal/damming-the-charles-river-episode-111/>

Brookline's Urban Forest

What does it mean for a resource to be public, and how many of our resources are truly public assets? At a time when the public realm feels increasingly important to protect, street trees and parks are steadfast reminders that social infrastructure remains a necessity.

Everyone who lives in Brookline, or even just passes through, breathes the air, enjoys the shade, savors the views, or benefits from the noise insulation. Trees and greenspace are inextricable from public health, providing benefits that extend throughout our community. These benefits extend beyond the human and include the birds, insects, mammals, fungi, and other organisms that rely on the habitat and shared resources.

Many factors shape the health of an urban forest. These systems have to contend with urban contamination, new pests and pathogens, climate change, and much more. As the Urban Forestry Manager, I have the privilege of working to build resilience into this system while reacting to challenges as they arise.

The Town of Brookline's 2021 Urban Forest Climate Resiliency Master Plan (<https://www.brooklinema.gov/1758/Urban-Forest-Climate-Resiliency-Master-P>) provides a roadmap for this work through the critical framing that trees are integral to addressing climate change. This plan assesses existing conditions to guide a data-driven operational approach to address urban heat and climate change. This plan also evaluates Brookline's canopy trends over 5-year windows to identify where canopy has declined and how that can be addressed. It proposed a Tree Preservation Bylaw for private property, which became fully effective in March 2025, and which the Town continues to implement and refine.

Overall, this plan provides a framework for building greater resilience into the urban forest. Resilience comes in many forms, and building diversity into the urban canopy is one important protective measure. This refers largely to biodiversity, but also includes age diversity, spatial diversity, and functional diversity of different ecological traits and behaviors. It's important to have trees that are fast growing and early-successional as well as some that are slow-growing and provide more long-term stability. Similarly, a mix of taprooting and more shallow-rooting species allows the canopy to utilize different soil horizons and moisture layers. Stress tolerance varies notably across species, and cultivating a mix of species helps prepare the urban forest for uncertain future conditions.

The Town of Brookline also becomes more resilient as a community and urban forestry system with increased participation, stewardship capacity, knowledge, trust, and collective investment into the urban forest. The Town hosts Stewardship Sundays, tree tours, community planting events, and other programming to continue to build this social resilience into the system. Friends groups and community leaders also do an incredible job building and stabilizing this fabric of education, care, investment, and stewardship

Infrastructure investments are usually most valuable immediately after installation. Benches, roads, and plazas inherently wear over time with use and weather. Trees, however, follow a remarkably different graph. They are among the only pieces of infrastructure that increase in value as time passes. Larger trees provide more shade, drink more stormwater, sequester more carbon, and clean more air. This is a salient reminder of the importance of investing in our community's mature and Heritage Trees. It is also a beautiful reminder why planting new trees is a capital investment that creates disproportionate value over the long term.

Working with trees requires patience and intentionality because their magic works on many timelines at once. The public benefits accumulate with time and extend throughout the community. These benefits are too easy to overlook and undervalue, but that is why the Town of Brookline is committed to planting, maintaining, and cherishing our public trees. The Town supports this work through the Capital Improvement Program (CIP) process, Community Preservation Act (CPA) funding, and many other grants and programs. These projects allow our Department of Public Works (DPW) staff to tackle large investments that holistically consider landscape design, historic preservation, green infrastructure, transportation, arboriculture, horticulture, and more.

Brookline residents also play an important role in building this resilience. Planting new trees on private property, investing in the care and stewardship of existing trees, and considering thoughtful pruning all contribute to the long-term health of our urban forest. Through the Town's Front Yard Tree Program (<https://www.brooklinema.gov/2074/Front-Yard-Tree-Planting-Program>), residents can partner with the Town to plant trees on private property near the public right-of-way, expanding the benefits of our street tree canopy where public planting opportunities may be limited.

It is a privilege to think and work in the immediate but to plan on "tree time." We have the opportunity to think about communities and generations to come and to plan now for the future with homage to the past. Trees have this remarkable ability to connect people and spaces across the decades, and we as municipal forestry staff, and as a community, have the beautiful task of investing in these organisms and supporting these connections now and in the future.

Jack Schiefer | MCA | ISA
Urban Forestry Manager & Tree Warden
Town of Brookline, Department of
Public Works

A gallery of Brookline trees.
Photos by John Shreffler





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Get Involved

Have an idea for a park project? Opportunities exist to improve your neighborhood park. Do you have the approval of the Director of the Parks and Open Space Division? Apply for a small grant from the Brookline GreenSpace Alliance. More information at brooklinegreenspace.org.

Support the Alliance



Continued from page 2

observe Common Nighthawks at dusk; they nest on gravel roofs. Bald Eagles are more frequently spotted these days in or near Brookline, such as at Jamaica Pond. Barred Owls can be found in wooded areas like Hall's Pond. It is striking how many species of birds have adapted to urban and suburban living. Out of necessity no doubt, for the grassland and orchard loving residents of 100 years ago are suffering from habitat loss.

Anyone can become a birder. Recent technology helps greatly. Advances in photography allow immediate close-up views of birds sighted; and especially the Merlin app for phones, which gives (suggested) ID's of birds by song and calls. These make it possible to receive immediate gratification for one's efforts. And to get into the spirit of birding, ask any birder what bird first got them excited about birding!

For listings of upcoming bird walks in Brookline, check the websites of the Friend's of Hall's Pond (<https://friendsof-hallspnd.org/>) and the Brookline GreenSpace Alliance. (<https://www.brookline-greenspace.org/>)

Neil Gore
Friends of Hall's Pond



Neil Gore leading a tour of Hall's Pond