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# Beavers Continue Their Rhode Island Comeback

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While communities in western Rhode Island began witnessing the return of beavers four decades ago, the animals only recently arrived in the area of the lower Blackstone, Pawtuxet, and Moshassuck rivers. (istock)

By TODD McLEISH/ecoRI News contributor

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CUMBERLAND, R.I. — At the Cumberland Land Trust’s nature preserve on Nate Whipple Highway, beavers created numerous dams on East Sneece Brook in the years after their arrival in 2014, flooding the property and forcing the organization to detour its hiking trail and build a boardwalk over the wettest areas.

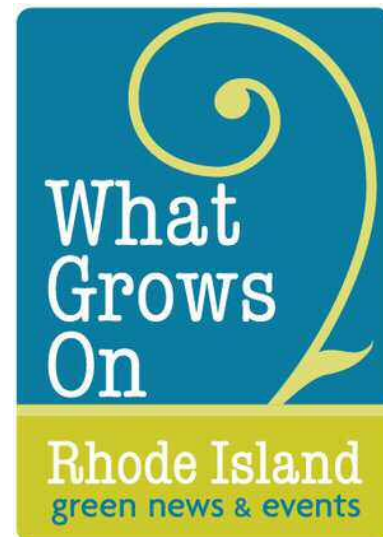
Worse, the flooding killed many trees in the Atlantic white cedar swamp, a rare habitat found at just a few sites in Rhode Island.

It’s a sign that beavers are continuing their comeback in Rhode Island, after being extirpated from the region about 300 years ago.

“There’s a historic culvert on the property, and we noticed it was being plugged up with sticks, but we didn’t know how,” said Randy Tuomisto, president of the land trust. “So we removed the debris, but it subsequently got filled in again. That’s when we noticed small twigs were being cut, telltale signs of a beaver.”

When the white cedar trees began to die, the land trust took action to address the situation. They hired a Massachusetts beaver-control expert to advise them on how to install a series of water-flow devices — a combination of wire fencing and plastic pipes going through the beaver dam that tricks beavers into thinking their dam is still working but which allows the water to flow down the stream unhindered.

While Tuomisto said he believes there are six or eight beavers on the property, along with a



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6-foot tall beaver lodge, flooding has been reduced considerably.

“Now they’ve moved down Sneeck Brook to other areas in town, to Diamond Hill Reservoir and Abbot Run Valley Stream. And they’re aggressively on the Blackstone River,” he said. “If you take a trip on the Blackstone bike path from Manville to Valley Falls, you’ll see the destruction of all the trees that they felled.”



On this property owned by the Cumberland Land Trust, the organization installed plastic pipes and fencing to address the flooding problems beavers created. There is large beaver lodge in the background. (Todd McLeish/ecoRI News)

According to Charles Brown, a wildlife biologist for the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, beavers were probably the first animal to disappear from the New England landscape after the arrival of European settlers. Their fur was in great demand by Native Americans and the new arrivals, and many beaver pelts were shipped to Europe as well. Brown speculates that the animals were extirpated from the area by the end of the 1600s.

It took until 1976 for the first ones to return.

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That's when a beaver lodge was discovered on the brook that leads into Carbuncle Pond in Coventry.

"They've been expanding ever since," Brown said. "By 1982, my predecessor Charlie Allen did a float trip around Coventry and Foster and found several colonies within that watershed."

Communities in western Rhode Island have been dealing with the inevitable flooding that beavers create for more than 30 years, but Brown said the animals have only recently arrived in the area of the lower Blackstone, Pawtuxet, and Moshassuck rivers, where municipal public works officials are now being called on to address flooding issues.

"Beavers have been entrenched in Burrillville and other parts of western Rhode Island for some time, and the towns there know how to deal with them. But they're still finding new habitat and expanding elsewhere in the state," Brown said. "It takes them a while to move around and get established in new areas. They were pioneering into the Cumberland and Lincoln area about 10 years ago, and now they've become a regular part of the landscape there."

Brown had meetings with Cumberland officials to discuss how to address the flooding caused by beavers at Monastery and Diamond Hill State Park, and he often has similar meetings with officials in other communities. He [offers counsel](#) about beaver behavior and life cycle and offers advice on how to reduce the flooding

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using water-control structures and how to protect notable trees with perimeter fencing.

Sometimes Brown advises officials to consider hiring a trapper to capture the beavers during trapping season, which runs from Nov. 1 through mid-March. Rhode Island fur trappers typically harvest about 100 beavers each year, many of which are captured because of nuisance situations.

Despite their reputation for damming streams and flooding roadways, beavers play an important role in the environment by creating habitat upon which many other species depend, from river otters, mink, and muskrats to ducks, dragonflies, and amphibians.

“Great blue herons gravitate toward newly flooded areas with dead standing trees,” Brown said. “But beaver ponds aren’t perpetual. They come and they go. Beavers create a dynamic state of change that can benefit a lot of things.”

According to Ben Goldfarb, author of the award-winning 2018 book [Eager: The Surprising, Secret Lives of Beavers and Why They Matter](#), beaver ponds also help to recharge aquifers, dissipate floods, filter pollutants, and ease the impact of wildfires. A 2011 report he highlighted estimated that restoring beavers to one river basin in Utah would provide annual benefits valued at tens of millions of dollars.

“Even acknowledging that beavers store water and sustain other creatures is insufficient,” Goldfarb wrote. “Because the truth is that

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beavers are nothing less than continental-scale forces of nature, in large part responsible for sculpting the land upon which we Americans built our towns and raised our food. Beavers shaped North America's ecosystems, its human history, its geology. They whittled our world, and they could again — if, that is, we treat them as allies instead of adversaries.”

Tuomisto of the Cumberland Land Trust has a similar perspective.

“We want to keep the water level high enough so the lodge can sustain the beavers through the winter. We would rather live with beavers because they provide an ecological benefit in creating wetlands and wildlife habitat,” he said. “We understand the destruction they cause to neighbors and roadways, and we could have trapped them out. But we're willing to take the bad with the good.”

*Rhode Island resident and author Todd McLeish runs a [wildlife blog](#).*

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