



Belmont Citizens Forum

Town Works to Make Streets Safer for All

By Sue Bass

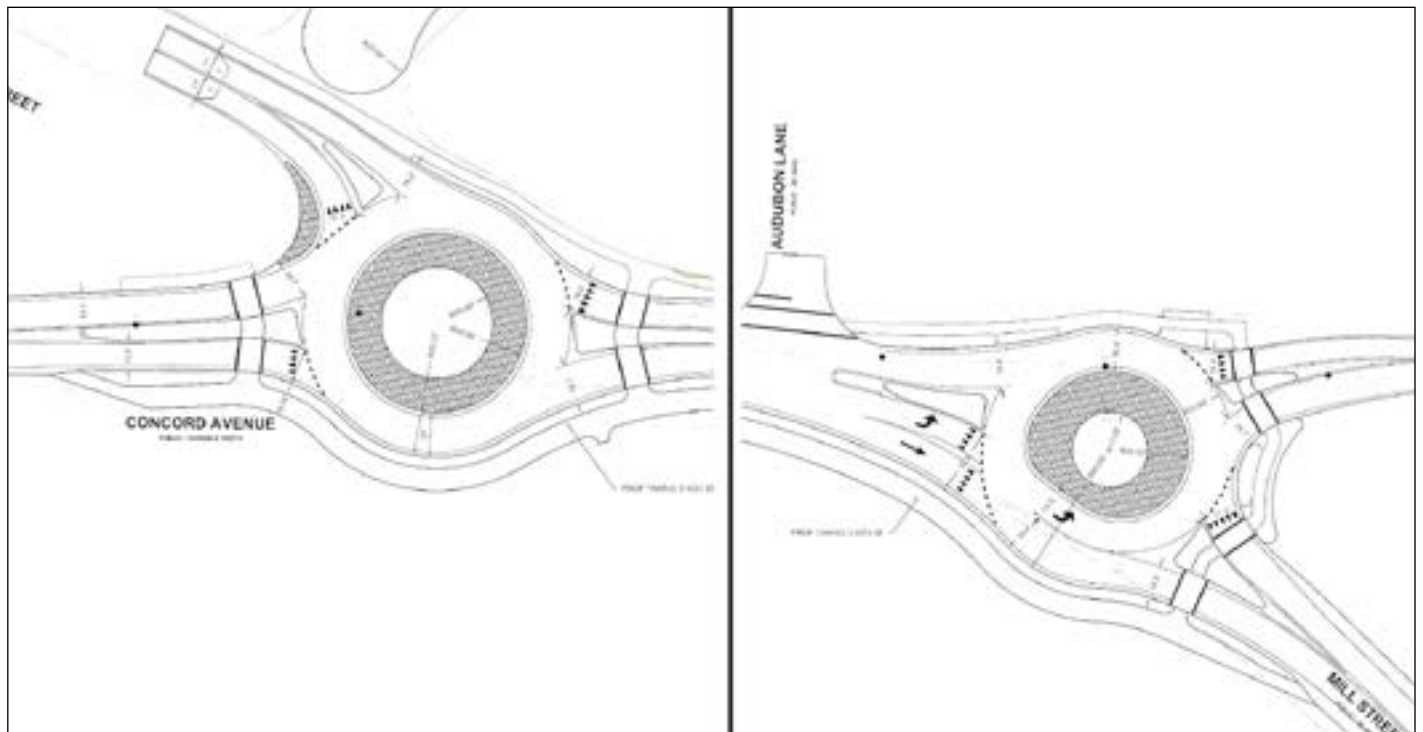
If you've noticed more speed bumps on Belmont's streets, it's not your imagination. They are a small clue to a new direction the town hopes to take: to slow traffic and make our roads safer for pedestrians and bicyclists.

Two major projects are on the horizon, if construction money can be found: signalization and pedestrian amenities at Huron Avenue and Grove Street, and two roundabouts at Concord Avenue and Mill and Winter Streets. The Winter Street roundabout will need some political magic in addition to money.

Meanwhile, two quicker projects are about to get underway. A \$432,000 state Complete Streets grant will enable the town to add or improve five crosswalks on Concord Avenue near the new high and middle school, and there's a small but poten-

tially meaningful effort to calm traffic on Juniper Road near Mass Audubon's Habitat Sanctuary. The Juniper Road changes, which can likely be funded from the town's road budget, were approved unanimously by the Traffic Advisory Committee (TAC) on July 16. They might be a model for traffic calming on Somerset Street and Wellington Lane.

Juniper Road is an S-curve with no sidewalks but lots of pedestrians. At one end is Somerset, just a short hop from its intersection with Concord Avenue. At the other end is Fletcher Road, a shortcut via Clifton or Prospect streets from Pleasant Street or via Tyler Road from Route 2. At least, that's what the map applications think. People who have driven over the pothole-filled portion of Somerset do not recommend that shortcut. That end of Somerset is privately owned, and the owners do not want the potholes filled. They want to keep nature's speed bumps.



Simplified split view of plans for the rotaries on Concord Avenue. The original drawings is available on the BCF website, www.belmontcitizensforum.org.

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Belmont Citizens Forum Inc. is a not-for-profit organization that strives to maintain the small-town atmosphere of Belmont, Massachusetts, by preserving its natural and historical resources, limiting traffic growth, and enhancing pedestrian safety. We do this by keeping residents informed about planning and zoning issues, by participating actively in public hearings, and by organizing forums.

The *BCF Newsletter* is published six times a year, in January, March, May, July, September, and November. Published material represents the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the Belmont Citizens Forum.

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The Fletcher Road end scares the people who live there. “We see a lot of cut-through traffic from Tyler and Fletcher,” said Sophia Navickas. “Those people are not familiar with all the blind spots. There have been some frightening close calls.”

The simple proposal that Town Engineer Glenn Clancy presented to Belmont’s TAC involves signs at each end of Juniper alerting drivers to pedestrians in the roadway and recommending a 15-mile-an-hour speed limit.

This is an education effort, Clancy explained. The speed limits are only advisory. Sergeant Richard Murphy of the Boston Police Department, an advisor to TAC, confirmed that police cannot enforce advisory speeds. Murphy said that map app shortcuts are also based on legal speed limits, not advisory ones. The signs may be up as you read this. It’s a quick, cheap fix. Let’s see if it works.

The Concord Avenue crosswalks could get built this fall or next spring. At the post office, there will be a curb extension to improve the line of sight so motorists can see pedestrians about to make the crossing and vice versa. At the new library, the crosswalk will be raised, so it does double-duty as a speed bump for both cars and bicycles. There will also be a curb extension on the library side.

There will be a new crosswalk at Edgemoor Road. At Underwood Street, the crosswalk will be raised, and a refuge island will be constructed in the middle of the street. The current crosswalk at Trowbridge Street will be eliminated, but the one a block away at Baker Street will be improved with a curb extension and an island. At the library and at Underwood Street, the town is proposing pedestrian-activated flashing beacons.

The dual roundabouts where Mill and Winter Streets meet Concord Avenue are an old dream, presented to TAC before the pandemic. Now, traffic on Mill Street and Winter Street has stop signs. Traffic on Concord Avenue sails through, but to curses from the Mill Street and Winter Street drivers who can’t believe they have to wait. It’s not a surprise to find Winter at Concord had seven accidents last year, according to police statistics, at the top of an unhappy list. The surprise is that Concord at Mill had only two crashes. On the other hand, if the Concord Avenue traffic did not have the right of way, those drivers would never get through the intersections at all.

The proposal is for a roundabout at Mill and Concord, with the usual rule that traffic in the roundabout has the right of way, and another roundabout at Winter and Concord. That should slow Concord Avenue traffic while keeping drivers on Mill and Winter Streets from being stuck.

Clancy has a design but no money for construction. And he has another problem: the design requires taking about 60 feet from Rock Meadow conservation land at the roundabout near Winter Street and an approximately 20-foot-wide strip along Concord Avenue between the two roundabouts.

This plan might have benefits for Rock Meadow. It’s a spot where people get onto the conservation land, an alternative to the jammed driveway that’s the official entrance. Perhaps the town has a piece of land it could swap. The town’s Conservation Commission has to agree to any such plan, though, and the state Legislature would have to approve the taking of any conservation land.

Close to our hearts at the Belmont Citizens Forum is the intersection of Grove Street and Huron Avenue. A BCF board member, Sumner Brown, was seriously injured on November 1, 2022 “in a road rage, hit-and-run attack at that intersection that,” he said in a memo to the town, “left me in hospitals for a few weeks.”

A conceptual design for the reconstruction of Grove Street was presented to TAC in March. In addition to a traffic signal, the project would involve better crosswalk alignment and likely reconstructing sidewalks near the Grove Street Playground, including moving curbs near the playground. Clancy said raised cycle tracks in some segments could be possible. He has met with Cambridge officials who have been working on a bicycle path on Huron Avenue. Belmont plans a public forum after the conceptual design work is further along.

Finally, the most notorious intersection in Belmont is the complex of streets under the railroad bridge in Belmont Center where Concord Avenue turns right and then left, brushing Common Street and Royal Road. At rush hours, it’s jammed. In off hours, visitors winging south from Leonard Street express astonishment and then horror. As they leave the tunnel under the bridge, no traffic signs indicate which street has priority. Drivers wonder what



FEDERAL HIGHWAY ADMINISTRATION

they’re supposed to do. It does seem to work best, however, if people take turns.

No one would lay out streets that way. The intersection is an accident of history. Concord Avenue, one of the original roads in this area, was authorized in 1803 and opened in 1807 as a toll road, then called the Concord Turnpike, from Boston through Cambridge and west to the town of Concord. When the Fitchburg railroad was laid out in 1843, train tracks crossed Concord Avenue at street grade on a diagonal.

In 1907 the tracks were raised. At that time there were three tracks, including the single-track Central Massachusetts Railroad, now the route of the Massachusetts Central Rail Trail. That’s when turns were added and the stone bridge was built.

I remember two decades ago hearing then-Selectman Bill Monahan say they had considered many solutions, including stationing a police officer there to direct traffic, and everything they did made the situation worse. However, Clancy has not given up. “We are working with the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, through their bottleneck-grant program, to study improvements at the center bridge,” he said. “I may have something to report to the Select Board as early as this fall.”

Sue Bass is a member of the BCF Newsletter Committee. She was the group’s first president and was a director for its first decade.

Vision for a Better Belmont: Paul Joy

This article is the sixth installment in a series of interviews with Belmont leaders about their vision for Belmont's future. Jeffrey North conducted this interview. It has been edited for length and clarity. – Ed.

Belmont's Economic Development Committee (EDC) was formed in 2020 by the Select Board following the completion of the Belmont Business Strategy. Its role is to develop, implement, and update the recommendations in the Belmont Business Strategy, in conjunction with town staff and departments.

BCF

Let's start with how you see the Economic Development Committee's (EDC's) vision and strategic role in fostering Belmont's growth and development. As the chair, what is your vision for economic development in Belmont, and how does it align with the town's overall growth and prosperity? How does the EDC's strategy under your leadership support this vision?

Joy

When I joined the EDC three years ago, I really didn't know quite what to expect. At the time, we had a six-person committee working through the Rapid Recovery grant work and recommendations (bit.ly/BCF-RRPlan). Frankly, I had no idea what a Select Board was and only a vague understanding of Town Meeting. I grew up in California with city councils where the municipal government is independent of the schools.

Given that background, plus the fact that the EDC was a newly formed business-focused committee, I think we have been remarkably successful. As I speak today, we have business representation from Waverley, Cushing, the Center, East Concord Ave, and now all the way out next to Route 2. Plus, we have solid input from professionals like me, having switched from working independently to joining a larger firm. We've expanded to nine members, and for the past two years, have had more applicants wishing to join than we have committee seats.

So, what is my vision for economic development as chair? I see Belmont at an important juncture in its 150+ year history, with both significant

challenges and potential for change. Let's face it, change is never easy. Our town is facing the squeeze of fiscal challenges, and the successful passage of the largest (\$8.4 million) override in our history is a pivotal moment that residents cannot ignore.

It's not to say it's going to be easy. When you look at the original zoning maps for Belmont from 100 years ago, there were a lot more commercial areas than we have today. We need to revisit these zoning strategies to accommodate new types of development that can boost our economy and complement what's happening around us in our neighboring cities of Cambridge, Watertown, and Waltham, and neighboring towns of Lexington and Arlington.

For 2024 and beyond, our focus includes fostering restaurant developments, exploring opportunities for hotels, and attracting innovative industries and participants. We've seen significant interest in these areas, and we aim to capitalize on this momentum. By aligning our zoning and infrastructure with modern needs, we can create vibrant commercial districts that support both new and existing businesses.

Belmont has to change. Our fiscal challenges are simply too great for business as usual to prevail. I am tired of seeing school programs cut, like music and foreign languages, just as I don't like seeing hard-working public servants overworked and underappreciated. However, we must also realistically assess the impact of our initiatives. While projects like wayfinding signage and modest zoning reforms are steps in the right direction, they alone cannot solve our fiscal challenges.

BCF

In thinking about Belmont's economic character and EDC's role, what are the defining elements of Belmont's commerce and business environment? How is the EDC working to enhance these elements for the town's overall benefit?

Joy

When I think about Belmont's economic character, it has traditionally been focused on preserving the charm and integrity of our town squares. This approach is proving inadequate in today's changing economic landscape. We're

seeing an increase in vacant storefronts and business closures, which is concurrently escalating the tax burden on our residents. It is profoundly disappointing to see the Craft Beer Cellar and Trinktsch close, to pass by the former CVS building on Leonard Street, and to see Bradford retail spaces continue to be empty and unleased. To meet our current and future economic needs, we desperately need a new strategy—one that embraces sustainable growth and diversity.

It's important to note that vibrant and in-demand commercial spaces are what truly drive development and economic growth, coupled with good planning. I would love to see Belmont attract and grow a mix of innovative and sustainable businesses—both startups and established companies and investors. We should find ways to adapt our centers of commerce to modern needs and trends. This includes relaxing or eliminating parking requirements for businesses. And, not to be too audacious, Jeff, what about a bylaw that proactively regulates drone deliveries before they start—not retroactively after the fact?

We've also got to be mindful of aligning growth with sustainability. I believe fervently that clean technology, renewable energy and storage, and smart infrastructure solutions for parking, sidewalks, and roads are critical to enhancing Belmont's competitiveness. By attracting businesses in these sectors to set up in Belmont, we can alleviate the fiscal pressures on our residents and begin to shift the balance away from heavy dependence on traditional residential tax revenue.

It's important to note that we are starting to see empty storefronts get filled. I'm very excited about the new nail and hair salon on Leonard Street, Butternut, and Hanami's success this past year, and the new mixed-use development going up on Belmont Street next to the Cambridge and Watertown lines. These developments are encouraging signs of progress and a testament to the potential for revitalizing our commercial areas.

This year, in the FY26 budget, I'm very hopeful that we will fund a full-time economic development coordinator position within the building and planning department. The EDC has made this a key recommendation to the Select Board, and we



Paul Joy.

COURTESY OF PAUL JOY

recently voted once again to support its creation. Having a dedicated coordinator will provide the consistent effort and professional expertise needed to implement our strategic initiatives effectively.

So if we choose to strategically enhance our commercial areas and align our growth with sustainability and good planning, we can create a more vibrant and resilient economic environment in Belmont. This will not only improve the quality of life for our residents but also ensure a more stable and prosperous future for our town.

BCF

Can you provide examples of the EDC's collaborations with other town departments and committees? How have these collaborations contributed to tangible improvements in Belmont's community life?

Joy

As chair, I've prioritized fostering a culture of open collaboration in the EDC, emphasizing accessibility and engagement with all community stakeholders. We're committed to transparent dialogue across town, from soccer fields and PTO meetings to town hall discussions. This includes Belmont Media interviews, interviews with the *Belmont*

Voice, and others that seek to engage. This approach is centered on connecting with people, setting aside personal biases, and focusing on collective well-being.

Our collaboration extends across committees as well. Notably, our work with Vision 21 exemplifies this. These partnerships aren't just about policy-making but about creating a sustainable, multi-faceted development framework in Belmont. Our aim is to invigorate neighborhoods, fill vacant storefronts, and welcome a diverse range of businesses and services.

Collaboration and community matter. Buy-in matters. The democratic process that allows Belmont's boards, committees, and Town Meeting to actually get things done requires trust and progress. We cannot tackle the deep and systemic problems impacting our town in this moment of urgency by just falling back on tax increases and service cuts. And that is exactly what I hope the EDC will continue to deliver—tangible improvements to our community life through active, inclusive, and transparent collaboration.



A Belmont business.

I hope that proposals coming from the EDC are judged based on their merit and impact. It is critical for the health and well-being of our community that we focus on the substance of ideas and initiatives rather than personal or political biases.

By fostering such an environment of integrity, accountability, and collaboration, we can ensure that Belmont continues to grow and thrive, meeting the needs of all its residents and maintaining the quality of life we all value.

BCF

Let's talk about enhancing quality of life in Belmont while minding the store for fiscal stability. What steps do you believe are necessary in the short-, medium-, and long-term to enhance the quality of life in Belmont and achieve a sound fiscal future that includes vibrant neighborhoods, excellent municipal services, and world-class schools? How do these steps integrate with the EDC's initiatives and planning?

Joy

As I've said, I strongly believe Belmont has the potential to make key investments and bylaw changes that not only enhance our community but also boost our economic competitiveness. Here are some examples I believe are necessary to enhance Belmont's quality of life and achieve a sound fiscal future.

First, the EDC, in collaboration with the Planning Board, Vision 21, and the Select Board, is nearly done overseeing a new Belmont market analysis. Guided by a professional consultant RKG and insights from our new senior planner, Chris Ryan, this is absolutely critical at this juncture. It will inform our new master plan and help kick-start the zoning bylaw rewrite, replacing our current 1988 version. It's my hope that this market analysis will help us make informed, strategic decisions for Belmont's future. I've seen parts of their preliminary conclusions, and I can't wait to review the full report with our committee members. A huge shout-out to EDC members Wendy Etkind and Armine Humphrey for representing us on the working group.

Second, Belmont needs to bring more focus and initiatives to sustainability. Solar and energy storage are more than tools to reduce carbon emissions.

They're frankly economically savvy choices as well. The cost curves for both solar and storage technologies are declining at 8% to 10% per year, making their growth not just feasible but frankly inevitable.

Think about it this way—is there any Greater Boston town or city that wouldn't want more renewable energy for its consumption? Just look at what is happening to the California or the Texas grid with their abundant build-up for these technologies. Belmont has a real opportunity here to leverage Belmont Light to make ongoing investments in solar and storage capacity—reducing our electricity costs for residents and businesses AND selling excess electricity to our neighbors.

Third and finally, the zoning bylaw rewrite. This is definitely a long-term project, but it's crucial for fostering higher-density commercial and even industrial business development, mixed-use devel-

opment, enhancing neighborhood vibrancy, and supporting local businesses. It's my hope that this new zoning bylaw will truly be a generational document for sustainable growth, vibrant communities, excellent schools, and building a stronger Belmont. It's about building on roughly 2.5% of the total area currently zoned commercial and expanding it.

Together with the other two initiatives, this is about making Belmont a more attractive, sustainable, and economically vibrant community.

And the EDC's role? We will absolutely be at the table, representing Belmont's business community and listening, responding to, and ultimately incorporating their critical input to see this through.

Paul Joy is chair of the Economic Development Committee.

Write for the BCF Newsletter!

The BCF is looking for writers at all experience levels and all ages to write for our bimonthly newsletter. The BCF Newsletter provides in-depth coverage of local and regional issues including environmental protection, historic preservation, economic development, transportation, bicycling and pedestrian safety, and town planning and zoning.

The BCF's Mission

The Belmont Citizens Forum is a community organization that strives to preserve Belmont's natural and historical resources, limit traffic growth, and enhance pedestrian safety.

Mission Statement

To preserve and protect buildings, objects, open space, and districts in the town of Belmont that have historical, architectural, environmental, or general cultural significance.
To disseminate information about, and promote interest in, the historical, architectural, environmental, and general cultural heritage of the Town of Belmont and its vicinity.
To create public awareness and interest in traffic and public safety issues, as they relate to Belmont and surrounding communities.
To promote interest in the preservation and protection of environmental resources.
To educate the public and community leaders about the environmental importance of open space and the necessity of continuing community participation and oversight in proposed development projects.

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Profile in Belmont: Wendy Murphy

By Elissa Ely

“What is that house?” Wendy Murphy thought the first time she saw the mansion at 661 Pleasant Street: elevated, magisterial, remote, uninhabited, yet somehow alive. “Is it haunted?”

The William Flagg Homer House is neither inhabited nor haunted, though it is alive with architecture and art. As president of the Belmont

Woman’s Club, Wendy became one of its protectors. Her decade-long tenure exceeds term limits, though not for lack of a successor search. “I’m like a general contractor,” she says ruefully, “and the problem with being productive is that no one wants to be that busy.”

The Homer House deserves its own book. So does the Belmont Woman’s Club. So does Wendy Murphy, who has just written her own: *Oh No He Didn’t! Brilliant Women and the Men Who Took Credit for Their Work*. Three books are impossible in 1,100 words. I will do what I can.

In 1920, when women won the right to vote, the Belmont Woman’s Club came into existence. From inception, it was a gathering place for all classes, not—contrary to stereotype—somewhere to host the upraised pinkies of the wealthy. “These were women who were very smart but had no place to be smart,” says Wendy. “Once the 19th amendment was adopted, it was like a gushing, swirling groundswell nationwide.” The groundswell permitted women a metaphorical and literal liberation from their houses. Members joined and stayed; at least two current Belmont Woman’s Club members are more than 100 years old.

Their charitable mission hasn’t changed: education, philanthropy, community service. “There’s a barrier between what we know we’re doing and what the public thinks,” Wendy says. “We work hard to get the word out.” They fundraise for scholarships for graduating Belmont High School students, host free lectures on topics like civil rights, hold tours, co-sponsor family activities on the rolling lawn with the library and recreation departments, and even offered their rooms when the library needed to relocate books before renovation.

What has changed since 1920 is the admission criteria: early members were usually Irish and married (Wendy is the first president not to use her husband’s last name). All genders and ethnicities, as well as non-Belmontians, are welcome now.

The member with the highest personal stake in the Belmont Woman’s Club might be Homer House itself, purchased by the club in 1927 before women had a legal right to buy homes. Boston merchant William Homer, uncle of artist Winslow, constructed it in 1853 on land originally owned by

Roger Wellington of elementary school fame. The Homers built four elegant floors topped by a cupola for their summer home. It was an awfully long commute from their winter home in Boston.

Winslow Homer loved the place, and reproductions of his paintings hang on all floors. Some are pastoral and rich with youth. Some are more daring, like a waist-coated croquet player peeping at the dainty ankle of his partner.

Originally, there was no electricity or plumbing, though hand-painted tiles from Holland lined the copper bathing tubs, the kitchen ceiling was

hammered metal, wooden doors were carved magically into curves, and the ice box was so large it needed its own separate room. One staircase floated, and a bell pull on the first floor ran to the third-floor servant quarters, where servants were assumed perpetually available. More important than supernatural rumors was the possibility that a narrow secret space—almost unendurably tight—between kitchen and dining room served as a stop on the Underground Railroad.

Inch by inch, room by room, window by window, this place on a hill has been maintained and upgraded by the Woman’s Club.

“We use a defensive approach,” says Wendy, “We ask: What’s the worst problem we have to take on right now?” With boxes of tools and bottles of cleaners tucked into corners, she takes on a good deal of maintenance herself. “My skill set has improved with YouTube,” she explains.

Larger projects—like replacing stained glass or regrading an unascendable driveway—have required benefaction.

About a decade ago, the club donated the land on which the Homer House sits to the Belmont Land Trust. “We wanted to make it unusable to a developer,” Wendy explains. “We have no money. It’s all coming to us through the Land Trust.”

This suburban elegance is a long distance from Wendy’s day job. Working for the Middlesex County DA as a young lawyer (having already been a competitive baton twirler and a New England Patriots cheerleader—stories that must wait for the next book), she was assigned to child abuse and sex crime cases. Their victims were disproportionately girls and women, and—she felt—treated crudely

by the very legal system meant to protect them. Eventually, she left for private practice. “Eighty percent is pro bono. It’s like a nonprofit law firm on purpose because I wanted to change things.”

She became an adjunct professor of Sexual Violence and Law Reform at New England Law School. She also founded the Women and Children’s Advocacy Project, litigating to advance their constitutional rights (once suing former U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos for efforts to weaken Title IX). “We never conceive of the suffering of women

as a public injury,” she argues. “I don’t pretend to think I can fix the system, but I can irritate it. I’m scholarly but also in the trenches.”

Now she represents an entire class, as well as abused individuals within it. “I enjoy my freedom to be a rabble-rousing activist lawyer and call myself an impact litigator,” she says. “I want my students to fix the law, not obey the law.”

The world is full of ugliness, which most of us prefer not to notice unless we must. Wendy sees it, hears it, and attends professionally to its devastation. The mission exacts a personal price—you can’t unknow evil. But Homer House and the

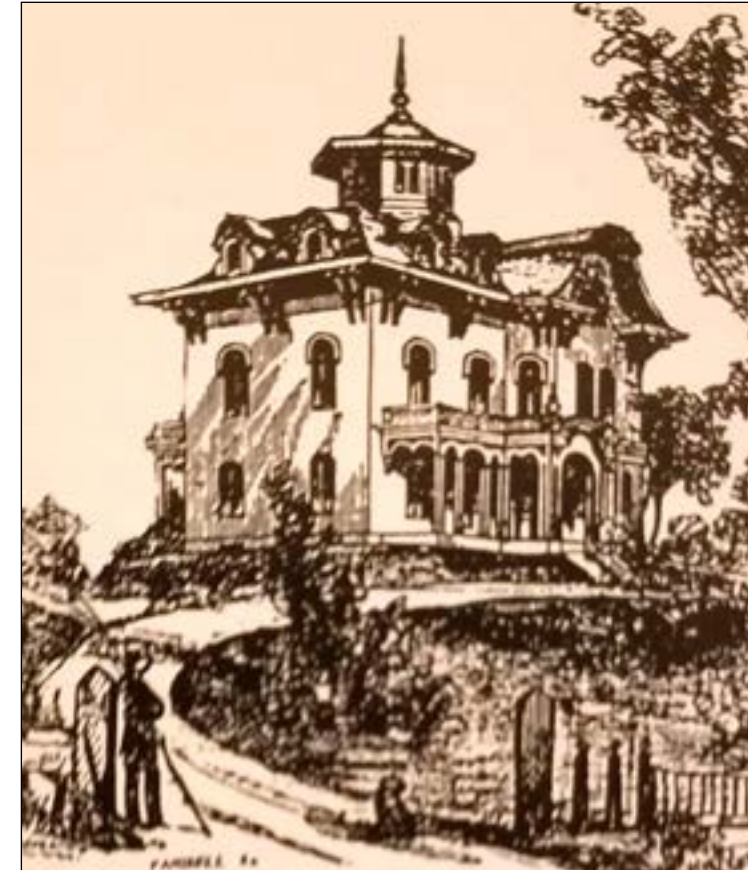
Belmont Woman’s Club are part of her therapeutic antidote. They bring a bit of beauty back.

In her own Belmont home, there is no floating staircase or hammered ceilings. She hangs tile, builds walls, and recently installed a French drain in the yard. “Retirement doesn’t appeal to me,” she insists, though should you care to become president of the Woman’s Club, please do contact her. “Less stress and fishing do.”

Elissa Ely is a community psychiatrist.



Wendy Murphy.



Nineteenth-century sketch of the Homer House.

COURTESY OF WENDY MURPHY.

BELMONT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Belmont's Trees Enrich Town Streetscape

By Vicki Amalfitano, Lucia Gates, Eva Hoffman, and Adam Howe

What makes you feel at ease when you drive down a town street? Would it be as comfortable on a hot summer's day without shade trees? Tall, beautiful oak, maple, and birch trees; magnificent beech trees, flowering dogwood, magnolia, and cherry trees enrich our streets and yards. They fill our senses with their beauty, and they cool our homes. They take in the carbon dioxide we breathe out, and they release the oxygen we breathe in. We are grateful for the trees' benefits and their positive impact on the value of our homes.

One crucial benefit the trees provide is not so obvious. Every mature oak supports more than 900 varieties of insects, from ants to caterpillars to beetles. All this rich insect life, in turn, supports a rich bird environment. And while we admire

the birds perhaps more than the hordes of small mammals—mice, chipmunks, squirrels, rabbits—they are all part of the food chain that supports our biome. And they all need native trees.

Beautiful though they may be, exotic imports such as katsuras, zelkovas, and ginkgoes support a very impoverished insect life. And some imports, such as Bradford pears, Norway maples, and Trees of Heaven (*Ailanthus*), are invasive trees. They literally drive out the native plant life.

History of the Belmont Shade Tree Committee.

Belmont is one of 90 Massachusetts towns designated as a Tree City USA by the Arbor Day Foundation. Among the criteria for this designation is that a town employ a certified tree warden and establish an advisory committee to support the town's professional forestry management efforts.

In Belmont's case, this tree committee is not a policy or decision-making body. Instead, the committee advises and supports the town's tree warden, who is ultimately responsible for forestry management decisions. Additionally, the Tree Committee is involved in community outreach programs and efforts to promote tree plantings and general awareness of the town's forestry efforts and best practices. Established in 1983, Belmont's Shade Tree Committee is composed of nine Belmont residents who are appointed to three-year terms by the town Select Board. Belmont's long-standing former tree warden, Tom Walsh, says that the committee's value is keeping trees on the town's agenda. He also addressed the value of an independent, objective committee.

This committee is guided by a *charge* from the Select Board, which outlines the committee's responsibilities and goals. These include reviewing current vegetation and tree practices and recommending annual priorities and plans for planting and maintaining Belmont's trees.

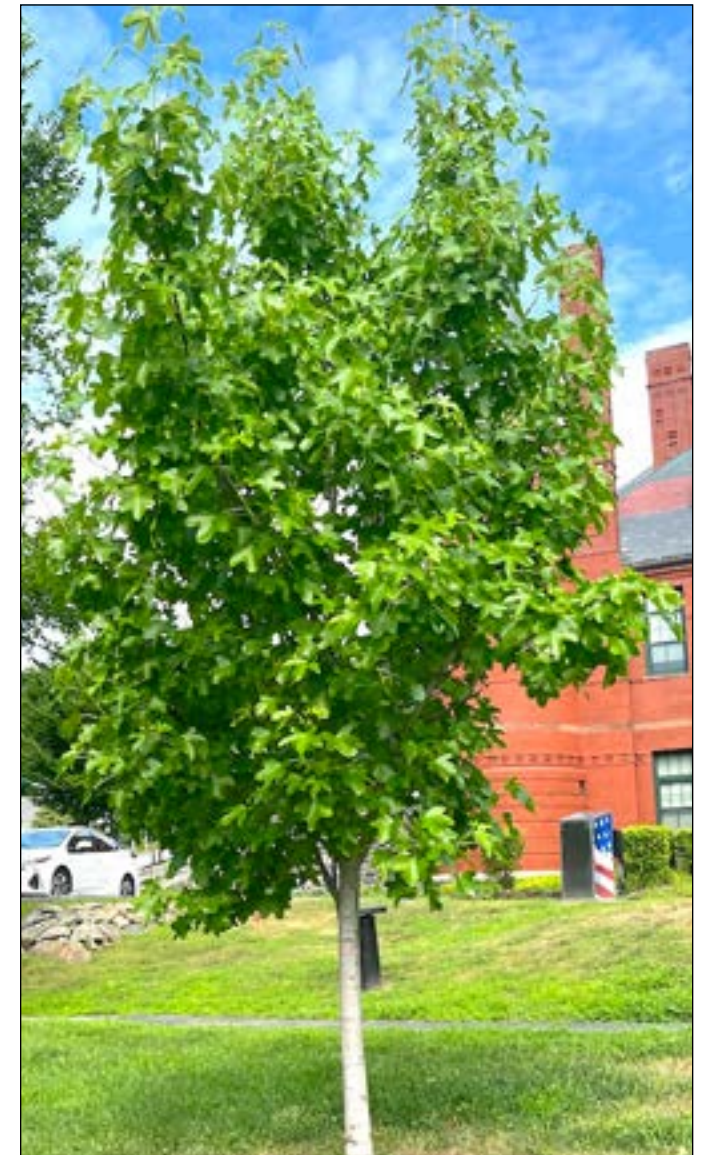
The Tree Inventory

If you go online to the Department of Public Works web page, you will find a very useful tool, the Belmont Tree Inventory, available at bit.ly/BCF-Tree-Inventory. This list contains a species breakdown as well as the total number of town trees, which is very useful for seeing the overall picture of trees in Belmont. This list includes trees in parks, cemeteries, schools, public lands, and street trees but not trees on private or conservation land. The town tree wardens use this list to monitor trees, plan for future plantings, consult with the Shade Tree Committee, and prepare budgets. The Department of Public Works (DPW) continuously updates it.

The first thing you will notice is that Belmont has a variety of trees. But as you look at the details, you will see that while there are many species with only a few trees, other species are widely planted.

For example, there are 3,437 maple trees, but only 642 oak trees. Of those maples, a preponderance are Norway maples. While Norway maples are beautiful trees, they are also aggressively invasive; the town no longer plants this species.

Other common trees which are no longer planted because they are alien species include ginkgoes (151), zelkovas (160), Callery pears (217), and



Round-lobed sweet gum tree outside Belmont Town Hall.

katsuras (73). We can enjoy them, and we will not remove them just because they are alien. But for now, we won't plant new ones.

The Notable Tree list

The Shade Tree Committee has a long-standing tradition of maintaining a list of Belmont's Notable Trees, available at bit.ly/BCF-Notable-Trees. With connections to the Arnold Arboretum and Harvard University, Belmont has planted many exotic and unusual trees in past years. To honor these trees, the committee recently updated this list on the town website. This list can be used for an informative ride through Belmont, visiting each beautiful tree as you circle throughout town.



Norway maple at Grove Street Playground.

COURTESY OF BELMONT TREE COMMITTEE

COURTESY OF BELMONT TREE COMMITTEE

The Preferred Trees List

The committee has another helpful tool for residents and contractors; the Preferred Tree list, available at bit.ly/BCF-Preferred-Trees. The list includes native trees and shrubs suitable for public and private plantings in Belmont. The committee was guided by current Belmont DPW Director and former interim Belmont tree warden Jay Marcotte's favorite saying, "The right tree for the right place."

The Commemorative Shade Tree Planting Program

The Commemorative Shade Tree Planting Program allows private residents, groups, and businesses to sponsor the planting of a town tree. Such trees not only beautify Belmont, but they can also be used to recognize individuals, groups, or events on a commemorative plaque in the town hall. A contribution of \$500 pays for the tree and its planting and maintenance. The town will be responsible for caring for and maintaining all trees planted under this program. Detailed information about this program can be found online at bit.ly/BCF-Comm-Trees or at the Department of Public Works at 19 Moore Street.

The Shade Tree Committee's Advisory Roles

The Shade Tree Committee's formal charge is "to review the current tree and vegetation practices, stay advised of the town tree budget, and make recommendations. The committee shall recommend annual priorities, long-range plans, and maintenance regarding plantings on public land to the Select Board and Town Meeting."

Armed with the intelligence from its recently developed Preferred Tree List of native species suitable for planting in Belmont, the Shade Tree Committee has increased its outreach and advisory role to the landscape components of town projects. The committee met in April with Stimson Design, the landscape design company for the new Belmont Library. The Shade Tree Committee members weighed in on the tree and shrub recommendations, offering suggestions on increasing native species, and advocated for protecting the current mature trees along Wellington Brook behind the site during the two-year construction period.

Shade Committee members have met with Holly Muson, chair of the Community Path Project Committee, on its landscape plan to review and

support the selection of native species. That meeting was an integral part of the community input process, as the long-awaited path is nearing the end of the 75% design process for Phase I.

In addition to these new building projects, the Shade Tree Committee has reviewed and approved new tree plantings in the old Belmont Cemetery, focusing on native species from the committee's Preferred Tree List. Shade Tree Committee Chair Eva Hoffman assigns a committee member as liaison to each town project that involves tree and shrub plantings to ensure that these projects benefit from the committee's resources and talent.

Belmont's New Tree Warden

The Shade Tree Committee works closely with the town to optimize the number and health of shade trees on public land, thereby enhancing the beauty and benefits trees provide to Belmont residents. The Committee enjoys the support and input of Belmont's Department of Public Works staff, especially the town's tree warden.

After the retirement of long-time tree warden Tom Walsh in July 2021, the warden post had been vacant. DPW Director Jay Marcotte acted as interim tree warden with Mike Santoro, a DPW staff member for over 40 years, assisting in the field. During the past year, Santoro completed training to be certified by the state to hold the position. People who successfully complete the six-module Massachusetts Qualified Tree Warden (MQTW) training course receive the MQTW designation required to hold the position of tree warden.

Santoro described his goals as Belmont's new tree warden as "staying on top of maintaining the Town's trees, street trees or on town property, and maximizing resources to increase the number of trees in Belmont." He said, "Ideally, we would plant a new tree to replace each older and diseased tree that needs to come down in any given year, but we don't have the resources for that." Santoro lauded the Commemorative Shade Tree Program as one way Belmont residents can simultaneously donate a tree to a public space and honor someone.

Vicki Amalfitano, Lucia Gates, Eva Hoffman, and Adam Howe are members of the Shade Tree Committee.

Belmont's Victory Gardens Remain Vibrant

By Jeffrey North

Victory gardening in Belmont has never been more popular (local food production activity during World War II notwithstanding). One of the largest and oldest continuously active community gardens in the Boston area, Belmont's Rock Meadow Victory Gardens consists of 132 garden plots of varying sizes, typically ranging from 12 by 12 feet to 50 by 50 feet. The gardens cover about three acres of land at the Rock Meadow Conservation Area along Mill Street, between Trapelo Road on the south and Winter Street on the north.

After glaciers retreated 10,000 years ago, Native Americans burned the land at what is now the Rock Meadow Conservation Area to keep the meadow open for hunting game and gathering food. Subsequently, the area has supported farming and grazing since the earliest colonial period, along with wool, lumber, and grain mills on Beaver Brook along the west edge of the meadow.

The Rock Meadow land was farmed by McLean Hospital from about 1895 until World War II to provide food for its live-in patients and staff. Ironically, the farm's operations ceased due to a

labor shortage, as many of the men who had worked the farm left to join the armed forces.

Patriotic Beginning of Victory Gardens

Victory gardens were part of a nationwide effort promoted by the federal government—and supported by local governments—to ease food shortages and boost national morale. At their peak, they produced up to 40% of the fruits and vegetables consumed in the United States during the war. Belmont's victory gardens were originally located near the town center on Concord Avenue at the site of the current high school campus. In 1969, the site was earmarked for athletic fields, and the gardens were moved to the town's new conservation land at Rock Meadow.

The term "victory garden" comes from World War II (replacing the term "war garden" used in World War I). People were encouraged to grow food to support the war effort. In Belmont, hundreds of garden plots were cultivated all over town.

Hundreds of school children and high school students were recruited and organized to work the mini-farms in their backyards or at many locations



JEFFREY NORTH

around town. Schools gave classes in gardening instruction. "It is hoped," wrote the *Belmont Citizen* newspaper in April 1943, "that many youngsters who formerly went away for the summer will feel the patriotic urge to cooperate this summer and help do the work that their older brothers used to do, and thus help solve a serious national problem."

The Victory Garden Committee, chaired by Margaret Barnes of Fletcher Road, organized the allocation of land and labor, procurement of seeds, distribution of supplies, and instruction to tenderfoot citizen farmers. The gardens were a model of efficiency and public commitment. In October 1946, at a luncheon ceremony at the Copley Plaza Hotel, Barnes received a special award from the Federation of Garden Clubs of Massachusetts for her Victory Garden project efforts. Her project plan was adopted by many towns throughout the Commonwealth between 1943 and 1945.

The town engaged in friendly but serious competition with neighboring towns to see which communities could produce the greatest amount of farmed food. Belmont produced surpluses of its produce and shipped impressive quantities of preserved fruits and vegetables to help feed America's armed forces. Citizens proudly presented their crops at the Harvest Show of WWII, where 300 exhibits

showed the produce from town gardeners' labor in September 1943.

During the 1970s, a time of "back to the land" and "grow your own," community gardening underwent a nationwide renaissance. Community gardens sprang up or were revitalized everywhere, in vacant inner city lots and suburbs like Belmont. By the 1980s, though, interest in community gardens waned.

By the end of the 1990s, many community gardens across the country had been bulldozed for other uses. The victory gardens at Rock Meadow were protected from that fate, although more and more plots became abandoned. Bruce Westgate, a Belmont architect, took over the management of the gardens for the next few decades. His guidance and encouragement kept the gardens active despite decreasing interest in community gardening. Gino Volpe, another long-time gardener, managed the water system for the gardens during this period. The system was an act of love to the garden community; it was highly functional and entirely managed by volunteer "engineers." While operating at less than full capacity, approximately 60 gardens remained tended throughout the next few decades.

Circa 2003, things began to change, first for Rock Meadow and then for the Victory Gardens. Deborah Hartman, resident of the Kendall Gardens neighborhood adjoining Rock Meadow, brought together some of her neighbors and other citizens in Belmont to share their concerns about the gradual loss of the meadow to reforestation. They formed a citizens group, the Friends of Rock Meadow, and for two years raised money to help pay for mowing. Then, in 2005, they partnered with the Belmont Conservation Commission and raised over \$75,000 in matching grants to create a long-term management plan. As trees were removed, the community gardens became visible along the Meadow and Mill Street, spurring renewed interest in the gardens.

Improved visibility and reduced shade in the victory gardens created renewed community interest. In spring 2007, there was a threefold increase in applications for garden plots over the previous year; all vacant plots were assigned, and a waiting list was started. Plots were divided, or reestablished, in the spring of 2008 to accommodate the demand, and again in 2010, with 16 more plots added. Large plots that had earlier been



Volunteers Aleida Leza and Darin Takemoto remove invasive plants from one of the pollinator plots held in the commons, which benefits the gardens (and the pollinators).

conjoined were divided, and 12 abandoned plots were reclaimed. Currently, there is a waiting list of almost 250 wannabe gardeners.

Restoring the vista from Mill Street and Concord Avenue also prompted criticism of the aesthetics of the garden plots. A common complaint of residents concerned the appearance of the plots, which were often defined by a wide variety of products. The term "shanty town" was employed more than once. At the time, fencing at the perimeter of each plot was unique. Fences were constructed from building debris, aluminum or vinyl siding strips, pieces of baby cribs, old window screens, lawn furniture, and the like. In response to neighbors' concerns, gardeners took it upon themselves to remove much of the debris, and garden fees were used to purchase uniform wire fencing. Work days were devoted to cleaning up trash and accumulated debris, and soon, the comments from visitors were far more

positive. Portions of the garden were landscaped by the community and included planting of a perennial flower bed at the entrance to the gardens.

Since the Rock Meadow property was purchased by a combination of federal and local monies, creating a regional recreational facility, plot assignments are no longer limited to Belmont residents. Current gardeners hail from all of the towns surrounding Belmont, with about a quarter of the garden community from outside of Belmont.

There is a striking diversity in the gardener community, with up to a dozen languages spoken in the plots. This diversity has extended to the agricultural techniques and in the variety of produce garnered from the plots. Currently, there are community plots held by a sheltered workshop from McLean Hospital; the Belmont Food Pantry; family groups; and other local teams. Management of the garden also shifted from a single manager,



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contact Mary Trudeau at mtrudeau@belmont-ma.gov or 617-993-2667.

Garden fees are decided each spring but have remained at \$75 for a number of years. Fees include water use, and often include group deliveries of compost or wood chips. Water taps are spaced throughout the gardens where hoses can be attached. Water is turned on in early May and turned off in mid October. Maintenance of the water system is generally done by volunteer gardeners, assisted by the Belmont Department of Public Works.

Garden Rules and Information

Rules and etiquette enable community gardens like ours to function and thrive. For more information on the Belmont Victory Garden, please read the [2023 Garden Handbook](#)

Community Gardens at Habitat

Communal gardening opportunities also can be found at the Community Garden plots at Mass Audubon's Habitat property. Habitat has 10 plots for seasonal rent of \$75 to members of Mass Audubon (Living in Belmont is not a requirement). The area also has several communal garden plots, raised beds for propagating plants for replanting around Habitat, the Sun & Moon Herb Garden, and a children's garden. Audubon staff reminds gardeners that they are in a wildlife sanctuary, so they must be prepared to share their bounty with deer, groundhogs, rabbits, and other such wild creatures that browse fruit, flowers, and veg. Any members of Mass Audubon interested in renting a garden plot may send an inquiry to Habitat@massaudubon.org.

Thank you to Stephen Pinkerton, Mary Trudeau, Victoria Thatcher, Curtis Adams, Richard Betts, Terry Bragg, Deborah Hartman, Margaret Velie, the Belmont Conservation Commission, and the digital archives of the Belmont Public Library for [Belmont Citizen](#) newspaper articles from the 1940s.

Jeffrey North is the managing editor of the Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter.

to a team of committed gardeners. This has shifted much of the garden-related decision-making to the community and a seven-member board rather than a single person.

In recent years, Rock Meadow has added beekeepers and bee hives to the agricultural uses on the property. Currently, approximately eight teams of beekeepers manage between 12 and 24 hives throughout the growing season. Adding pollinators to the meadow has assisted gardeners with pollination, and produced gallons of local honey.

Today, Belmont Victory Gardens' mission is to provide accessible space for gardeners in an active, supportive gardening community. Gardeners contribute to Rock Meadow conservation and are committed to educating gardeners on sustainable organic methods.

How to Apply for a Victory Garden Plot

Registration for garden plots begins in late February. Returning gardeners may complete a 2025 registration form and mail or hand deliver it with your check payment to the Town of Belmont, Attn: Mary Trudeau, Belmont Conservation Agent, 19 Moore Street, Homer Building, Belmont, MA 02478. To get on the waitlist for a garden plot,

Autumn Avians Brighten Belmont

By Fred Bouchard

This is a selective survey of Belmont birds that you might observe in Belmont from October through December, or even into winter as our climate warms. Four arbitrarily selected environments highlight our tour: two of the town's "birdier" (and, coincidentally, more visited) locales, Rock Meadow and Clay Pit Pond, Belmont Backyards, and Little Pond.

Rock Meadow: American Goldfinch, Northern Cardinal

These familiar endearing species share the common trait of sexual dimorphism: gals and guys don't dress alike! Male goldfinches' plumage shouts "yellow and black!" in the breeding season, when their conical seed-searching bills turn gray to pink, while females (and young males) sport a subdued lemony gray year-round. Cardinals, of course, hit the red spectrum—males tomatoey, females tawny buff-brown—though all adults have the signature crest, black face, and orange triangular bill.

Goldfinches are the brightest faces in a large family, including common streaky House Finches and rare buffy Pine Siskins. They bounce as they fly between flowers and weedy patches, flashing white

wing bars, and their song bounces with them: *ti-DI-di-di!*

Cardinals are blushing starlets. While they prefer good cover in thickets, overgrown yards, gardens, and hedgerows, they amp up their brilliant whistle loud and clear: *what-cheer-cheer-cheer!*

These "permanent residents" are avid seed eaters. They haunt our cultivated gardens in summer and frequent our seed feeders (favoring nyger) and wild thickets off-season.

Belmont Backyards: White-breasted Nuthatch, White-throated Sparrow

In your yard, should you hear a dry, nasal "hneeh!" or "rank!" and spot a tidy gray/white critter with a black cap and a beady eye heading down a trunk, you've met your neighbor nuthatch. The Sitta family of North America has just five species, and our White-breasted is the biggest at 5 1/2 inches. They forage by inching down or along a branch for ants and grubs with a thick, slightly upturned bill. The smaller Red-breasted, with its pirate mask and squeaky "eek!", stays high in conifers.

Nuthatches brace themselves not with their tails—as do woodpeckers and the related Brown Creeper, which faces up-trunk—but with strong claws strategically placed. These perky year-rounders gladly visit suet feeders and birdbaths.

There are "sparrows," and there are sparrows. House Sparrows are, in fact, weaver finches, an Asian species introduced to North America around 1850 by nostalgic Europeans. Our commonest true sparrows—among 30-odd species nationally—are the permanent resident Song Sparrow and the migratory White-throated Sparrow. Close scrutiny helps distinguish these similar birds.

Song Sparrows are a bit smaller, slighter, and streakier,



A Northern Cardinal.

with idiosyncratic, multipart vocalizations. White-throats sport white throats and over-eye stripes, and often yellow lore (eye-to-beak) spots. Their voices tend to high, soft whistles and buzzy trills. We see them in spring and fall. Summers, they breed in the Berkshires and northward to Canada. They winter in our southern states and the Caribbean. Both sparrows scratch in garden beds and feeders, permitting your careful study.

Little Pond: Belted Kingfisher, Hooded Merganser

Sharp, dry rattles announce the arrival of a Belted Kingfisher, our daredevil aerial pond-side summer resident. At 13 inches, it's mid-sized of three North American species, all with oversized heads and beaks and short legs and tails. They carve nests with dagger bills in mud holes, where they deposit and guard their eggs.



Belted Kingfisher.

While Kingfishers may remain quietly watchful as they perch on overhanging branches, their fishing style is quite dramatic. They may hover before they dive straight down deep to spear fish, then rear back to swallow them whole. Comic, but impressive! Females and juveniles sport a second rusty "belt."

Mergansers comprise our most distinctive family of ducks. They are unique crested hammerheads with long bodies, striking plumage, and razor-like serrated bills. They come in small (Hooded), medium (Red-breasted, only found in salt water), and large (Common).

Common Mergansers congregate in flocks on migration. I've seen 50 at Clay Pit and over 100 on the Mystic Lakes; their pure-white broadsides present a formal naval flotilla.

Since Hooded Mergansers prefer family (5–10) groups, they often maneuver into cozier waters. They're dependable at Blair Pond and Black's Nook off Fresh Pond. Spring courtship displays can bedazzle with erected crests and head-bobbing with gentle purrs. They migrate between the Caribbean and Eastern Canada.

Clay Pit Pond: Northern Mockingbird, Great Blue Heron

America's finest avian mimic has been nesting annually at Clay Pit for decades. Mockingbirds flash their long, white-banded wings and make a bewildering hullabaloo with a lightning-fast mix-tape of nasal im-bird-onations.

Their elaborate sequences imitate—or ward off—neighboring species like jays, cardinals, wrens, and titmice. Their songs may be delivered from a prominent tree-top or guy-wire or deep in a holly bush or sumac stand as they protect a nest or guard a food stash.

Male mockers repeat and vary song snippets in random order and may sing day and night. They might even toss off a cell phone ringtone. Birdsong expert Don Kroodsma tallied one backyard Bocelli warbling 465 snippets in 26 minutes!

Fellow mimics, more original but far less prolific—the summer garden skulker Gray Catbird and dune-top repeater Brown Thrasher—have long since flown south. Mockers stick year-round. Sexes are "conspic-

cific" (look-alike), but it's the guys that vocalize, if much less, in darker months.

Majestic and graceful, sentinel-erect pondside or tree-roosting, he's an iconic, pterodactylic silhouette in the sky . . . The Great Blue Heron (GBH) is our largest (4'4") and heaviest (5+ pounds) of a dozen herons/egrets.

Can each of us recount a Great Blue Moment? Here's mine: I'm crouching along a sheltered edge of Brookline's Hall's Pond boardwalk, watching a GBH stealthily stalk a small amphibian (Green Frog?) Intent on his prey, the lanky giant readies for the kill. His eye only suddenly shifts in my direction—he pauses mid-step. A tense moment: strike or flee? His strike goes awry, the frog dives; with a startled "gronk!" he flaps away gracefully, launches into the air, circles, and lands on an overhanging roost.

At Clay Pit Pond, GBHs prefer the semi-cover of the Underwood Street island. On migration, they also frequent Blair Pond and Little Pond.

Fred Bouchard is a member of the BCF Newsletter Committee

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