

From salty zombie forest to thriving marsh: Duck Harbor transformation just the start

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WELLFLEET — When I am in the mood to goof off or daydream (which is most of the time), I take a spin by the Wellfleet pier, then out to Duck Harbor.

I consider the route to be better than the Pacific Coast Highway, with awesome water views and less risk of veering off a cliff. The pièce de résistance is rolling over the dike that spans the Herring River, where layabout gawkers like myself often stop in the middle of the road and take it all in.

The whole world out there is full of intrigue and adventure. You've got the Great Island Trail, maybe the best hike on Cape Cod. The beach at Duck Harbor is huge, with big backing cliffs, and you can walk north into Truro or sidle over onto Bound Brook Island. Behind Duck Harbor is mysterious Griffin Island, a place where few ever go. And the entire little universe is crisscrossed with trails and dirt roads.



This combination of images, taken in approximately the same spot, shows the dead forest near Duck Harbor in Wellfleet and what it looked like after clearing operations by the Cape Cod National Seashore. The project will "promote the recovery of native salt marsh vegetation in the area," according to the Seashore. *Eric Williams/Cape Cod Times*

Big changes are afoot in this paradise, most likely for the better. The big deal is the Herring River restoration project. According to the Friends of Herring River website, "the objective is to restore the 1000+ acre Herring River Estuary, once one of the most productive salt marsh systems in the Northeast, by gradually removing existing restrictions in the river to restore natural tidal flow."

That project is starting to crank to life, but there's also a heck of a sideshow underway out at Duck Harbor, where the Cape Cod National Seashore has been clearing acres of dead forest, a victim of saltwater pouring through a breach at the beach.

As an enormously self-centered person, I have concerns about any type of change. When L.L. Bean stopped making my favorite pants, I vowed to never cover my legs again. My "Shorts Forever" protest campaign failed to gain traction in the national media, and I caved in once it got chilly. Then I fell in love with a new style of trousers and the world was right again.



Trail sign and map of the Herring River Overlook Conservation Land and Trail in Wellfleet. The trail provides excellent views of the Herring River area. *Eric Williams/Cape Cod Times*

By almost all accounts, the changes in store for the Herring River area will be an awesome transformation, good for nature and even humans. But the selfish side of me thinks about the mess of construction and massive clearing, which sets off my powerful Winnie the Pooh "oh bother" alarm.

I figured I had better truck out there and see what was going on. So, I whistled for the Curious Prius, set the dial to "Regular Goof-Off Route" and we headed out. The first stop was a little trail I have grown to love: the Herring River Overlook Conservation Land and Trail (1000 Chequessett Neck Road), maintained by the fine folks at the Wellfleet Conservation Trust.

If you're seeking a bird's-eye view of the Herring River and the dike, this is your kind of place. Part of the beautiful mile-long trail runs along a ridge overlooking the river and the whole place is peaceful and piney.



A look at the Herring River dike in Wellfleet as seen from the Herring River Overlook Trail and Conservation Land. *Eric Williams/Cape Cod Times*

I strolled back to the Prius and we rolled down the hill and onto the dike, home to awesome sunsets and the strangest animal encounter of my life.

Back in 2017, I watched a couple of otters being released there, a lovely thing to see. The next day, I took the family back to the dike to see if they were still around. Well, those dang otters must have thought it was feeding time. They pursued us up the side of the dike, almost nibbling our pants legs and we had to run away.

Me and the Pri rolled over the dike and saw some folks working near the river. I was jealous of their hard hats, a chapeau honor I have never achieved. You don't need a hard hat to buy a jumbo Nestle's Crunch Bar at the Wellfleet Marketplace, likely my riskiest activity.



A massive ProGrind machine sits in the Duck Harbor Beach parking lot in Wellfleet. It is being used to clear an area of forest and shrubbery compromised by saltwater intrusion from a recurring breach at the beach. *Eric Williams/Cape Cod Times*

On we sped to Duck Harbor. It was a mind-blowing sight! Just a few weeks ago, I had traipsed around the hellish dead forest to the north of the beach parking lot, and now it was all gone. All that remained was a vast sea of sweet-smelling wood chunks. A giant monster machine called the ProGrind sat in the parking lot, perhaps hungry for more (the company's slogan is "We Eat Trees for Lunch").

If this was environmental progress, I was all for it! That salty zombie forest really needed a reset. According to the Cape Cod National Seashore, the Duck Harbor clearing will "promote the recovery of native salt marsh vegetation in the area," which sounds promising.

On the way back home, I told the Prius that I would approach the Herring River restoration project with an open mind. If I can adapt to new pants, dealing with a thousand-acre salt marsh shindig should be a walk in the park.