

'A massive die-off': Seashore to clear large area of dead vegetation in Wellfleet

Eric Williams Cape Cod Times

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WELLFLEET — Welcome to the dead vegetation zone. There won't be time to take any photos. You'll be too busy dodging thorns, stepping over fallen trees and trying to keep your feet dry.

Perhaps only Stephen King could love this place.

But things are about to change. The Cape Cod National Seashore is planning to remove dead trees and shrubs from about 120 acres in the Duck Harbor area of Wellfleet, where saltwater from Cape Cod Bay has washed in regularly over the past two years on robust high tides.

Geoffrey Sanders, the Seashore's chief of natural resource management and science, said the area has undergone a "drastic transition" over the past two years, as what had been a wetland and forested area was inundated with saltwater.

"It resulted in a massive die-off of vegetation," he said.



Saltwater that heads into the interior from high tide washovers at Duck Harbor in Wellfleet has caused a large-scale die-off of trees and shrubs in a forest behind the beach. The Cape Cod National Seashore plans to clear dead vegetation from the area, with the project set to start by the end of January. *Eric Williams/Cape Cod Times*

According to Seashore information about the project, "removing the dead vegetation at Duck Harbor will promote the natural recruitment of salt marsh plants and increase the ecological productivity of the area, while helping to minimize breeding habitat for mosquitoes."

Residents of Wellfleet still talk about the summer of 2021, when a mosquito boom in the suddenly-changed area made outdoor activities almost unbearable.

"It's a horror movie," longtime Wellfleet resident Jodi North Birchall told the Cape Cod Times in July 2021, about the mosquito plague. "This is the worst I have ever seen."



Battling a mosquito boom in Wellfleet in 2021

Cape Cod Mosquito Control employees apply larvicide to a thicket on Bound Brook Island in 2021 in Wellfleet , attempting to beat back a mosquito boom. *Eric Williams, Cape Cod Times*

Cape Cod Mosquito Control crews have worked frequently around Duck Harbor over the last two years, applying larvicide, cutting access paths into the gnarly territory and clearing out waterways to reduce mosquito reproduction opportunities.

Bart Morris, assistant superintendent of Cape Cod Mosquito Control, said navigating the squishy terrain was not for the faint of heart.

"Once you get out in the middle, you take a step and you sink in a foot," he said. "The next step, it's up to your knee. One more and it's up to your thigh."



In March 2022, Cape Cod Mosquito Control Project Superintendent Gabrielle Sakolsky stands next to a large ditch near Duck Harbor in Wellfleet that was cleared by mosquito control crews, restoring water flow and making the spot less hospitable for mosquito reproduction. *Eric Williams/Cape Cod Times*

The effort paid off, and the summer of 2022 was significantly less riddled with mosquitoes for many Wellfleetians. Morris is cautiously optimistic that the Seashore clearing project will keep the ball rolling in the right direction.

The clearing project will likely get underway by the end of January, Sanders said, and will involve heavy-duty equipment including an excavator. Parts of the area will be closed off during the operation to keep the public safe. Sanders said work cannot be done after March 31 because of endangered bats in the area.

Mulching of the dead vegetation will take place on-site, and the mulch will be spread around the area to help promote the growth of native species. Seashore scientists and staff from the Center for Coastal Studies will monitor the changes that occur in the clearing area, where the return of saltwater tolerant plants has already been observed.

The work is likely to provide valuable information for the Herring River restoration project, which is getting underway and will involve about 1,000 acres of what the Massachusetts Bays National Estuary Partnership calls "degraded estuarine habitat."

"We can take advantage of the Duck Harbor situation to learn a lot," said Sanders.

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