

Stow's Conservation Land

A Guide to the Open Space in Your Neighborhood



*Over the years, Stow residents have had the foresight to set aside more than 1,200 acres of **town-owned conservation land** to help protect wildlife, provide outdoor recreation opportunities, and maintain the Town's natural resources and rural character. Many of these lands – like Flagg Hill, Marble Hill, Town Forest, and Captain Sargent – have parking and trails so the public can enjoy them. Captain Sargent is also home to Stow's Community Gardens. Other parcels are smaller and do not have established trails -- they provide wildlife habitat and buffers, helping maintain the sense of "elbow room" in neighborhoods. The Stow Conservation Commission is responsible for managing these lands, creating and enforcing regulations for their use, monitoring boundaries and maintaining a trail network. Other organizations, including Stow Conservation Trust, Sudbury Valley Trustees, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service also own and manage protected land in Stow.*

What Does the Conservation Commission Do?

The Stow Conservation Commission is part of Stow's town government – and is a seven-member volunteer appointed body. It is part of the Conservation Commission's mission and legal obligation to protect the lands it owns in trust for the citizens of Stow. All town conservation land is protected under Article 97 of the Massachusetts Constitution. Some of these parcels were donated to the Commission to be protected as conservation land, others were purchased by the Town for this purpose. The Commission and its staff are responsible for managing this land, posting boundaries, maintaining trails and parking lots, and stewarding the natural resources of these properties.

What Activities Are Permitted on Conservation Land?

The town's conservation lands are protected for their natural resource values and passive recreation, including walking, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, picnicking, photography, fishing, nature study, and other passive recreation from half an hour before sunrise to half an hour after sunset. Mountain biking and horseback riding are permitted on some properties. A few smaller properties have no established trail networks or parking and help protect wildlife and neighborhood character.

What's Not Permitted on Conservation Land?

- Use of motorized vehicles including ATVs and dirt bikes
- Dumping or disposing of lawn clippings, leaves and brush from nearby residential lots and/or lawns, and landscaping
- Cutting or clearing of any kind, including creating trails
- Collecting plants or animals, firewood, or stones
- Camping and fires
- Hunting and trapping
- Storing personal property like canoes, lawn equipment, and firewood
- Construction of fences, sheds and other outbuildings

How Do I Know Where my Lot Ends and Conservation Land Begins?

The Conservation Commission has copies of existing surveys for town-owned land and can assist in locating boundary markers between residential lots and town land. For precise location of lot lines or installation of

bounds, homeowners need to consult with a licensed surveyor. Please note that where the town has posted Conservation Land Boundary signs, they tend to be located a few feet within the conservation land, and not on the precise boundary.

May I Remove Trees on Conservation Land?

You need to obtain permission from the Conservation Commission before removing any tree that is located on town conservation land, including trees that may be dead, dying or posing a hazard to private property. You are permitted to cut any tree limb that is overhanging your property but only back to the property line. Please do not remove dead trees or limbs from conservation land, as they have value to wildlife for food and shelter. Residents are not permitted to clear trails or operate chainsaws on conservation land.

What about Invasive Plants?

Invasive species are non-native plants that tend to crowd out native plants – common “invaders” in Massachusetts include European Buckthorn, Japanese Barberry, Japanese Knotweed, Garlic Mustard and Oriental Bittersweet. Homeowners interested in helping manage such plants on Conservation Land should contact the Conservation Commission in advance to discuss these projects.

Where Can I Put Leaves and Brush?

Homeowners seeking to dispose of leaves and brush are encouraged to make room in their yards for a small composting bin or area. Alternatively, lawn and landscaping services can be contracted to remove these materials. The Town of Stow does not have a town-operated composting facility and it is unlawful to dispose of these materials along roadsides or on town land. While these materials are natural, piles of them destroy the underlying vegetation, do not decompose rapidly, and stop new trees and shrubs from growing.

How Does the Commission Address Encroachments on Town Land?

When the Commission becomes aware of encroachments – activities occurring on conservation land that are a violation of the Commission’s regulations – it will contact the relevant landowner(s) and work with them to address the situation. The Commission will require the removal of encroachments and the re-naturalization or restoration of the land with appropriate native species. The Commission has the authority under town bylaws to impose fines when a landowner refuses to respond or fails to meet agreed-upon deadlines, or to address serious encroachments through litigation. The Commission does not sell or exchange land to address an encroachment.

What Should I Do if There are Illegal Activities Occurring on Conservation Land?

Contact the Stow Police (978-897-4545) and then the Conservation Commission (978-897-8615) if you witness illegal activities or vandalism of town property. For more routine issues like trees down across trails, please call or email the Conservation Commission with information about the location and severity of the problem.

How Else Can I Help?

The Conservation Commission appoints volunteer property stewards to help monitor properties and to serve as our “eyes and ears” in the field. Stewards agree to walk properties regularly, familiarize themselves with the Commission’s regulations, and report management needs such as overgrown trails or downed trees. Please contact us if you are interested in serving as a volunteer property steward.

Who Can I Contact to Get More Information?

If you have any questions about the Town of Stow’s Conservation Land, please contact us at 978-897-8615 or conservation@stow-ma.gov. You can also find maps and other information on the Conservation Commission pages of the town’s website at www.stow-ma.gov and connect with us at www.facebook.com/stowconservation.