**Page Pond Fields Mowing Plan**

If you travel along Barnard Ridge Road in Meredith, you may notice the open fields in the Page Pond Town Forest being mowed. For the past several years the entire field has been cut twice a year to reduce invasive species, in particular Autumn Olive and Oriental Bittersweet. Mowing is done in late July to allow birds nesting in the fields to raise their chicks and have them fledged before mowing begins. Last year there were bobolinks nesting in the field for the first time in many years, a sign that the fields are returning to a more natural state.

The Meredith Conservation Commission is the Steward of many conservation lands including Town Forests and is responsible for managing them for the benefit of the public. The Commission consults with biologists and other professionals in fulfilling this responsibility.

The Nature Conservancy describes that “Autumn olive is a problem because it outcompetes and displaces native plants. It does this by shading them out and by changing the chemistry of the soil around it, a process called allelopathy. Loss of native vegetation can have cascading effects throughout an ecosystem, and invasive species are one of the major drivers for a [loss of biodiversity](https://www.nature.org/en-us/what-we-do/our-insights/perspectives/biodiversity-crisis-nature-underpins-human-existence/).”

The autumn olive has been reduced enough that last summer one section of the field was not mowed and if possible, this section will not be mowed again this year, along with a second section of the field. In order to support the widest range of wildlife the recommended best practice for fields of this size is to mow only one third of the field each year on a rotating basis. This lets plants grow for three years before they are cut back. Once this pattern is established the field will consist of grasses and wildflowers of one-year, two-year, and three-year growth. This diversity provides food and habitat for a wider range of animals because different animals require different habitats.

When the oldest section of the field is cut after three years, the animals living there aren’t driven off, but rather just move to the section of field that meets their need. Animals living in the other sections of the field do the same thing, so they also have a continuous habitat in which to live, rotating from one area of the field to another each year. This practice also allows a wide range of colorful wildflowers to decorate the field for both human enjoyment as well as that of birds, butterflies, and bees, the latter of which are critical pollinators for crops both wild and cultivated. Milkweed, the only plant where monarch butterflies lay their eggs, is starting to reappear in the fields.

It’s not yet clear if this three-year mowing practice can be fully implemented at the Page Pond fields due to the extensive infestation of Oriental bittersweet. Mowing does not kill bittersweet; the only way to exterminate it is to dig up the entire root system which can run underground for many yards, or to use herbicides. Since bittersweet dominates a large portion of the northern section of the field, this area may have to be mowed every year to keep the bittersweet in check. According the UNH Extension Service, “Bittersweet is now considered a serious invasive species because it poses a significant threat to native plants. It is an extremely aggressive vine that climbs on other vegetation, restricting its host plant’s access to sunlight, nutrients and water.”

In addition to bittersweet and autumn olive there are other invasive species on the Page Pond Town Forest including Japanese knotweed, Oriental barberry and multi-flora rose. The Conservation Commission is also working to limit the spread of all these plants though it’s unlikely they will ever be eliminated.

Late summer and fall with cooler days and fewer biting insects is an ideal time to visit green spaces. The trails at Page Pond Town Forest, and at all Town Forests, are open year-round. Trail maps can be found at the Community Center, the Town library, Town Hall, and at the Town of Meredith website. For more information, or to volunteer to help, contact the Conservation Commission at Conservation@meredithnh.org.