

May 06, 2016

Tim Lehnert: Urban ponds are R.I.'s hidden treasures



In 2012, Holly Malenfant of Richmond and her son Tucker paddle their swan boat under a bridge in Roger Williams park, in Providence. PROVIDENCE JOURNAL FILE PHOTO

Rhode Island's urban ponds are largely hidden. When I tell people I live near Blackamore Pond in Cranston, I'm greeted with a blank stare, and am forced instead to use Spain Restaurant on Reservoir Avenue as a landmark. But my own pond knowledge is little better: not long ago I "discovered" Warwick Pond, which for years has been hiding in plain sight between T.F. Green Airport and Warwick Avenue.

That our local ponds live secret lives is unsurprising. As motorists and urban dwellers, we perceive the thick overlay of roads, parking lots, dwellings, and retail and industrial spaces as "natural," and ponds and marshes as alien. And perhaps no pond is better concealed than Providence's largest freshwater lake, the 114-acre Mashapaug Pond, which abuts Cranston in the southern part of the city. Because it is hemmed in by Route 10, train tracks, and Huntington, Elmwood and Reservoir avenues, it is difficult to see or access.

I'd frequented the small park around the southwestern part of Mashapaug but didn't really get a bead on the site until I consulted a map. This was revelatory: Tongue and Spectacle ponds — which feed Mashapaug — lie just to the west on the other side of Route 10, and Roger Williams Park's ponds — which are fed by Mashapaug — are a mile to the southeast.

Mashapaug has long-standing residential neighborhoods on its southeastern and southwestern sides, but its most famous neighbor for nearly 100 years was the now defunct Gorham Manufacturing Company. Gorham, which was bought by Textron in 1967 and closed in 1986, was at one time the world's premier manufacturer of sterling silver. Demolition of the company's 30 buildings was completed in 2001, and a lightly occupied shopping mall (Mashapaug Commons) and Dr. Jorge Alvarez High School now fill some of the former foundry space.

Despite ongoing remediation by Textron (which is treating contaminated groundwater with a pump system) and the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, and cleanup efforts by the City of Providence and nonprofits, the pond remains polluted. There is the legacy of industrial pollution, as well as runoff from the nearby Huntington Industrial Park. Mashapaug is also subject to high phosphate levels, leading to toxic algae blooms. As such, it is unsuitable for most recreation, and fish caught there are unsafe to eat.

The connection between Mashapaug and its cousin ponds in Roger Williams Park is rarely made, but on the evening of May 14, that's just what the Urban Pond Procession (upparts.org) will do, literally. The procession ("Celebrating Indigenous Culture and Urban Waters") will feature students from local Providence and Cranston schools, the Tomaquag Museum, and musicians and artists (including What Cheer Brigade and Big Nazo) walking from Roger Williams Park to J.T. Owens Park near Mashapaug Pond. The 1.5 mile-long march, which the public is welcome to join at all points, is UPP Arts' signature event, but the organization operates year-round, using art to engage schools and communities in protecting and celebrating urban natural spaces.

Our urban ponds are a tremendous resource in cooling the cities that surround them, and acting as carbon sinks. They are also sites of natural beauty, and habitats for fish, birds, and other wildlife. There are many commonsense ways we can support these ecosystems: avoid chemical lawn fertilizers; don't dump paint, solvents, or oil down drains; clean up after pets; go easy on salt and ice-melt; and don't feed ducks and geese (it's not good for them, and the waste from large non-migratory populations fuels wildlife-choking algae blooms). Larger-scale efforts to protect ponds include preserving and restoring wetlands, and remediating heavy metal and other contamination.

While there is the natural tendency in Rhode Island to see the glass as half empty (and chipped and dirty as well), one of the great achievements over the last half-century has been the rehabilitation of Narragansett Bay. Similarly, the condition of the state's urban rivers has been much improved, and uncovering Providence's downtown waterways proved key to the capital city's Renaissance. No doubt our urban ponds would be a great place to launch a Renaissance 2.0 in metropolitan Providence.

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