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PLEASANT VALLEY WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

Mending of nature continues Year after fierce windstorm, damaged areas reopening

BY CLARENCE FANTO, Eagle correspondent

LENOX — Just over one year ago, a fierce microburst with hurricane-force winds inflicted massive damage on Mass Audubon's Pleasant Valley Wildlife Sanctuary, with total clean-up and repair estimates ranging from \$800,000 to \$1 million.

Now, with the help of \$200,000 in support from the American Rescue Plan Act, the Pike's Pond Boardwalk has reopened. The boardwalk is a popular viewing site for resident beaver colonies busy preparing their winter quarters.

The rescue plan act was approved by Congress and signed by President Joe Biden in March 2021. Massachusetts received nearly \$5.3 billion.

Repairs are still pending for this fall on the All Persons Trail near the entrance to the 1,100-acre sanctuary property at 472 West Mountain Road.

Private funding campaigns have been launched, Mass Audubon President David J. O'Neill told The Eagle earlier this year.

The destructive storm on July 27, 2021, investigated by a National Weather Service team from Albany, N.Y., left major sections of the historic sanctuary in shambles. Hundreds of mature trees were uprooted or snapped close to the entrance and along trails, along with countless branches strewn across the landscape like matchsticks.

Seven miles of trails, representing at least half of the total, had to be closed temporarily following a storm

that resembled a mini-tornado and caused widespread damage elsewhere in Lenox. The government meteorologists found that two separate microbursts — straight-line winds of 80 to 90 miles an hour — had touched down in sections of the town after first striking the wildlife sanctuary.

An outpouring of assistance from staffers and volunteers enabled Mass Audubon to reopen Pleasant Valley to the public within a few days and to operate its summer youth camps.

Although there were no storm injuries and no buildings were severely damaged, the Pikes Pond Boardwalk was destroyed. It was part of the sanctuary's universally accessible trail, frequently used for Mass Audubon's educational programs.

"We are witnessing firsthand the impact of climate change and the immediate, unprecedented threat it poses," Becky Cushing Gop, regional director for Mass Audubon West, said in an email in response to questions. "We must address Pleasant Valley's vulnerability in order to improve the resilience of our landscape, for the benefit of people who enjoy the sanctuary, the wildlife who rely on it, and for the many essential services nature provides."

She said about \$200,000 of storm work so far includes tree removal and repair of the boardwalk, trail and office building. Still to come this fall into next spring: All Persons Trail repair, ecological management work, a trail assessment and educational signage.

In addition to the ARPA grant, funding sources include private donors, the Garden Club of America in collaboration with the Lenox Garden Club, and Mass Audubon's emergency maintenance fund.

O'Neill described Mass Audubon's \$1 billion "Nature and Climate" campaign, aiming for completion in 2023, as a response to more frequent severe storms, such as the Lenox microbursts, resulting from climate change.

"We need to transition to a clean-energy economy, address our transportation issues, but also enhance and protect nature," he said in an email. "That includes protecting and expanding our forests, managing our agricultural land, restoring our marshes and wetlands, since those 'natural-climate solutions' are necessary so we don't see the severity of these storms increase."

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Pike's Pond Boardwalk has reopened at Mass Audubon's Pleasant Valley Wildlife Sanctuary. Over a year ago, a microburst inflicted damage on the boardwalk to the pond. Some of the uprooted trees remain in place, taking people through striking views of storm damage. BEN GARVER — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE