

# River trail damaged from flooding, but not trailhead

**By Tom Ayres**

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Mother Nature works in fickle, often confounding ways.

Consider, for example, the Ottauquechee River Trail (ORT), which meanders on a 2.3-mile loop alongside the river from the trailhead at East End Park in Woodstock and back again.

The trailhead has been mired in controversy in recent weeks due to the remov-

al of copious, allegedly invasive species, dead trees, and other flora from the riparian buffer just below the upper level of East End Park by ORT volunteers. The clean-up effort was a town-permitted part of an ongoing plan to make the first one-third of a mile of the trail accessible to people with disabilities. Conservationists, however, including Marie Caduto, the regional watershed coordinator for the Vermont De-

partment of Environmental Conservation (DEC), and Michael Caduto (Marie's spouse), the executive director of Sustainable Woodstock, challenged the ORT group for having removed vegetation from the riparian barrier. "The activity has greatly diminished the ecological functions and benefits of both the buffer and floodplain," Michael Caduto alleged in a May letter to the Standard.

Fast forward to this past Monday, when Woodstock, the surrounding region — and the ORT — were pounded by the worst flooding since Tropical Storm Irene in August of 2011. Many in Woodstock fretted that the ORT trailhead and its riparian buffer, recently heavily defoliated but soon to be rejuvenated with native plantings, would bear the brunt of

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the raging floodwaters. Such was not the case, however. Instead, it was the one-mile, out-and-back stretch of the ORT that ambles through a hay field cultivated by the Billings Farm & Museum that took a devastating hit — so much so that ORT volunteers may have more work ahead of them to rebuild the trail than they did when first constructing it in the summer of 2020.

“I’m just back from walking the trail — and there are really two stories,” ORT lead volunteer Tom Weschler wrote in an email late Tuesday afternoon. “The trailhead received minimal damage — it just needs some cleanup. We did do some clearing in late April, but the existing vegetation and trees along with the rip-rap certainly protected the 1.3-acre parcel.

“The real issue is the lower field at the end of the intended handicap-accessible part of the trail,” Weschler continued. “Once you drop down from the accessible trail, you enter a different world. The mile-long field was under the river yesterday. I don’t know if Billings Farm will be able to hay much of the field next year, given the river carve-out, the field of rocks that have been deposited, and the extensive covering of silt and sand that the flooding managed to leave behind,” the ORT spokesperson continued. “Beyond that, all the bordering vegetation and trees are covered with detritus that accumulated as the river was active on the property. It’s a mess.”

In a statement that the leadership team at Billings Farm & Museum sent to museum interpreters and other staff Tuesday afternoon, officials at the non-profit outdoor agricultural museum corroborated Weschler’s

assessment of the damage done to the hayfield that the ORT traverses in both directions.

“For the not-so-good: there was significant flooding on the hayfields,” the notice to employees noted, before going on to talk about other impacts of the flooding at the Billings site, which lies predominantly across the river from the ORT. “We sadly lost most of the cut and wrapped hay [Farm Manager] Phil Ranney and team worked so hard to make. The lower hayfields are covered in debris and silt, a few of the new walking trail signs need to be reinstalled [at the farm and museum site], and the entire lower basement of the powerhouse was flooded. We are still assessing damage to these areas, but there will be a good deal of clean up needed,” the otherwise largely upbeat email missive to Billings Farm & Museum employees said.

In conclusion, Weschler took pains to detail the damage the flood inflicted on the ORT’s equipment and path enhancements as well. “All of our picnic tables — six of them — and 12 benches crafted from a huge, blown-down, 1870 Norway spruce from Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Park are all washed away,” the ORT spokesperson said sadly. “Also, we had constructed two wooden bridges to cross some wetlands that have been totally damaged.

“I fear it is going to be more work for the trail to recover from this storm than it was to build it in the first place. We’re calling the ORT team together immediately. We’ll need a series of volunteer days to get the trail back into usable shape, but we’re on it,” Weschler added, capping his remarks on a positive note.