

Charles River Drought

By Ariane Komyati

Last week, Roslindale resident and nature photographer Chris Lang was taking photos at Millennium Park in West Roxbury when he noticed something he had never seen before. The Charles River by the canoe launch was so dried up, one could nearly walk all the way across the other side without getting their feet wet.

“For years, I have been a regular visitor to Millennium, there in the mornings walking the trails and photographing birds and other wildlife. I know that stretch of the Charles River extremely well. During the course of a typical year, it can be swollen with rain, and lower when it's dry,” remarked Lang. “Some years, you can see a small sandbar in the middle when it's especially dry. But never have I seen it as low as it is now. Never have you been able to walk into the middle of the river basin or essentially cross over to the other side staying just about completely dry. Who's to say for sure if it's the effects of climate change or just a rare but periodic dry spell, but for certain this isn't normal for this stretch of the Charles.” Lang shared his photos of the dry river to a nature group on Facebook. One person accused him of “photoshopping” the photos.

Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) Director of Water Resources Anne Carroll explained that there are four stream gauges on the Charles River to record the flow. “Last week, the stream gauge in Dover was approaching a record low. The record low for it was set in 1997 - and we're very close to that,” Carroll said. “Right now, in the northeast region, it is at a critical drought level. The last time we had this sort of drought was 2016. We do believe that because of climate change, we are seeing drought frequency in flash drought conditions.”

Bird watcher and West Roxbury resident Mary Ellen McMahon was taking pictures of birds at Millennium Park the other week when she noticed how dry the Charles River was. “I've never seen it that low. Last year I don't think that we had a sandbar! This year we can walk in the middle of the riverbed - unbelievable. I hope nature corrects the situation,” she remarked. “It is concerning to see part of the river disappear but a little further down river, it looks good. It does bring the shorebirds to the mud flats and that could mean an interesting fall migration, which starts mid August.” McMahon said she is thinking of the fish and animals that depend on the river. She said she is concerned about the wild weather in other parts of the US - west and see fires, declining water, deadly flash floods, and mega droughts - and would not want that type of weather in New England.

As of Aug. 1, many towns in Massachusetts have outdoor water use restrictions, including the nearby towns of Dedham, Walpole, Westwood, Sharon, and Medfield. However, the City of Boston does not have any restrictions at this time. “Boston’s drinking water comes from the Quabbin Reservoir, about 65 miles west of Boston, and the Wachusett Reservoir, about 35 miles west of Boston. The reservoirs are maintained by the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA),” explained Dolores Randolph, the Director of Communications at the Boston Water and Sewer Commission. “At this time, the reservoirs are supplying sufficient water and there are no use restrictions in place for the City of Boston. Boston Water and Sewer Commission, along with the MWRA encourages everyone to conserve water wherever they can so that we can continue to enjoy sufficient quality drinking water.”

For a full list of towns in MA with water restrictions, visit www.mass.gov/info-details/outdoor-water-use-restrictions-for-cities-towns-and-golf-courses.