

## Williams Woods trail reopens

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CHARLOTTE -- A new trail in the Williams Woods Natural Area that diverts hikers around damage from last summer's microburst is now open. Bright yellow trail markers and snowshoe tracks will guide visitors on the new trail route at The Nature Conservancy's Williams Woods Natural Area in Charlotte.

With the help of a crew from the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps, undeterred by December's record snowfall, and the efforts of Alex LaBerge, an Eagle Scout from Charlotte, this popular natural area now has a small parking area and a new trail head.

A microburst in June brought down several trees at the start of the trail, creating a potentially hazardous situation. Some of the fallen trees were estimated to be between 200 and 300 years old. Natural areas like Williams Woods provide a glimpse into the clayplain forests European settlers would have encountered blanketing the Champlain Valley from shore to mountain slope. Valley clayplain forests, with a rich mix of species and nut-bearing trees essential to wildlife, now exist on just 10 percent of their historic range, according to the Nature Conservancy.

"Safety concerns and the opportunity to study how the forest regenerates prompted us to reroute the trail," said Emily Seifert, stewardship manager for the Vermont chapter of The Nature Conservancy. "Many downed and living trees would have had to be removed to make the old trail safe for visitors. By rerouting the trail and leaving the snags and downed trees where they fell we have an opportunity to study how quickly they decay, how woodland creatures use this disturbed habitat, and how quickly the trees regenerate."

Most of the woods remain untouched, a characteristic of a microburst. The new trail route takes walkers safely around the edge of the major blow-down while providing a clear view of the debris created by the disturbance.

Throughout the preserve, undulations in the trail pinpoint where other trees have fallen over the years, and provide evidence of at least three major natural disturbances in the last century -- the Great Hurricane of 1938, the ice storm of 1998 and Hurricane Floyd in 1999.

Opportunities to study mature woods are rare in New England, and the Conservancy was joined last year by professor Bill Keeton from the University of Vermont, Middlebury professor Marc Lapin and Harvard fellow Charlie Cogbill.

Stakes, metal tree markers and ribbons mark active research plots in the woods and should not be disturbed. The Conservancy is formulating long-term research plans using data collected over the last two decades.

Healthy forests provide habitat for many woodland creatures that need downed trees and standing snags. Woodpeckers begin the process by drilling holes in the dying and dead trees, creating nest holes that are then used by other creatures. Insects and fungi break down the fallen logs and over time replenish nutrients in the soil, feeding the next generation of trees. Fungi and insects provide food for many animals in the forest, including flying squirrels.

### IF YOU GO

The Williams Woods Natural Area is located on Greenbush Road, 2 1/2 miles south of the village of Charlotte and six miles north of Ferrisburgh.

For a trail map and more information visit [nature.org/Vermont](http://nature.org/Vermont).