
Skowhegan Conservation Commission Newsletter March 2024

Town of Skowhegan Code Enforcement Office, 225 Water Street Skowhegan, ME 04976, (207) 474-6904

Whitten Brook: Skowhegan's Hidden Gem



What is Whitten Brook?

Whitten Brook is a small, cold stream that runs through downtown Skowhegan and into the Kennebec River north of Weston Dam. The western branch of Whitten Brook starts in Coburn Woods, and the northern branch originates just south of the Skowhegan Fairgrounds. The two branches join near Russell Road, forming the main stem, which then flows south for half a mile and into the Kennebec River. The Whitten Brook watershed is relatively small, draining only 304 acres of land. The large undeveloped forestland in the western branch of the watershed (71% of the watershed area) is managed by Somerset Woods Trustees for conservation and public recreation.

Why is Whitten Brook important?

Urban streams and wetlands provide natural flood control, recharge the groundwater, and maintain water quality by trapping sediments and pollutants. In addition, small streams recycle nutrients, create habitat, and maintain biological diversity for plants and animals.

It is unusual for a small urban stream to contain wild, native brook trout, a rare and sensitive cold-water fish species native to Maine. Although brook trout populations are declining across their historic range within the eastern US, studies show that Maine is the only state with intact populations of wild, self-reproducing brook trout in lakes and ponds. Furthermore, Maine is the last true stronghold for stream-dwelling populations of wild brook trout, supporting more than twice the number of intact subwatersheds as the other 16 states in the eastern range combined. (MDIFW, 2021)

How is Whitten Brook being threatened?

The primary culprit in the impairment of Whitten Brook is the increased volume of stormwater runoff containing pollutants flowing into the stream from parking lots, roads, and rooftops, especially along the more urban northern branch and main stem. Stormwater carries dirt, oils, metals, and other pollutants off developed areas in the watershed resulting in increased erosion, sedimentation, and habitat degradation in the stream. As a result, Whitten Brook does not meet state water quality standards for bacteria, aquatic life or habitat, and is classified as one of Maine's 31 "urban impaired" streams. (Whitten Brook Watershed Restoration Plan, 2011)

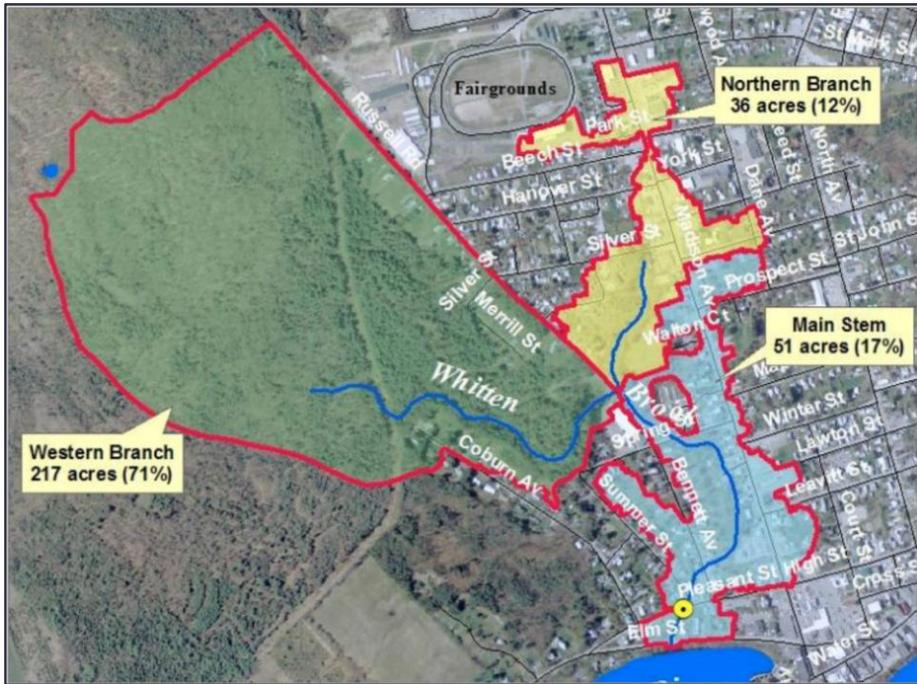
What can I do to help protect Whitten Brook?

1. Dispose of chemicals as specified on the product's labeling. Call The Skowhegan Transfer Station at 207-474-6918 or 207-474-6904 to find out about proper disposal techniques and locations for unused chemicals.
2. When changing or filling fluids in motor vehicles, use a funnel, drip basins & drop cloths to avoid and contain spills.
3. Follow product directions when using lawn fertilizers and pesticides to avoid over-applying.
4. Clean up lawn clippings, lawn care products, and yard waste from driveways so they don't flow to the storm drain.
5. Spot-treat lawn pests like bugs and weeds, or use diluted white vinegar to kill weeds & pests instead of pesticides.
6. Clean up yard waste promptly.
7. Clean your catch basin's yearly (business's)
8. Do not put cooking oil or grease down the drain.
9. In winter, keep salt and sand in closed containers, and spread salt before the storm to prevent ice from forming.
10. Remove snow manually before applying any salt or sand.

For more information visit www.thinkbluemaine.org, a website published by the Cumberland Soil & Water Quality District.

What is the Conservation Commission doing to help protect this important resource?

In 2011, members of the Skowhegan community in partnership with the Conservation Commission, the Maine Department of Environmental Protection, and the Maine Department of Transportation, developed a 10-year watershed restoration plan for Whitten Brook. The purpose of the plan was to improve water quality in Whitten Brook, so it can support a healthy native brook trout population. Over the past 10 years, several action steps in the restoration plan were completed to improve water quality. However, recent data indicate Whitten Brook needs further water quality improvements to meet the goals of the restoration plan. The Conservation Commission has continued monitoring water chemistry in the brook and was recently awarded a 604b planning grant through the State of Maine to update the 2011 restoration plan. The project will include conceptual engineering plans for a stormwater detention basin to treat runoff from upper Madison Ave. This basin will provide temporary detention of stormwater, helping slow down stormwater to minimize impacts to downstream habitat, and reducing the amount of sediment and other pollutants that flow downstream. As you start to take notice of the brook, please consider volunteering for clean-up efforts and help maintain a healthy ecosystem throughout the brook's watershed.



Map of Whitten Brook from Watershed Restoration Plan, 2011