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'Bronto' helps improve Salem forest

Excavator mows through part of town forest

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---- — SALEM — The Brontosaurus has sharp teeth and devours an entire tree in a split second, but it's no dinosaur.

It's a state-of-the-art piece of equipment with sharp, swirling blades that can clear an entire forest in no time at all, chewing up tall trees and spitting them out. It's a big yellow monster with an appetite for vegetation.

It's a Caterpillar excavator with a mower attachment, known affectionately as a Bronto.

Thanks to the Bronto, what was a 2-acre patch of woods in Salem's town forest yesterday morning is now a barren plot covered with mulch. But it's destruction with a purpose.

The town has hired John C. Brown & Sons of Weare to clear part of the 205-acre forest and better control its growth. The machine is a large excavator with a 3-foot-wide mower attachment that can destroy almost anything in its path, including trees not suitable to be harvested for wood.

"All I can say is it's a big chipper," Conservation Commission Chairman William Dumont said.

He's overseeing the \$2,600 project, some of which is funded through a state grant.

Clearing the more than 20-foot birch and speckled alder trees makes way for more suitable growth, including sweet pepper bushes, blackberry bushes and sweet ferns, Dumont said.

This provides a better habitat for wildlife, attracting songbirds that find it easier to feed on seed, and ruffed grouse and wild turkeys that would nest in the new growth, he said.

It's also ideal for the rabbits, foxes and squirrels that call the town forest home, Dumont said. The new shrubbery makes it easier for them to hide from predators. It's a level of comfort not provided by a bunch of birch trees, he said.

As the Bronto and its operator, Richard Snook, completed their work yesterday — grinding trees from 7 a.m. through the afternoon, Dumont followed the large yellow excavator with a rake, cleaning up the mulch it created. Similar work was done in 2002.

“I’m surprised how fast this is going,” Dumont said, watching as tall trees disappeared with a single swipe.

John C. Brown & Sons does work in several states, including Florida, according to supervisor of operations Steve Snook, Richard’s brother. Bronto — one of 17 used by the company — is commonly used to clear areas for power lines.

How did it get its name?

“It kind of looks like a brontosaurus and it eats trees,” Steve Snook said.

Fred Borman, a natural resources specialist for the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension, served as an adviser for the project. The Bronto makes a tough job much easier, he said.

“It can take down trees and shrubs in seconds flat,” he said.

The work at the town forest was supposed to end this afternoon, but it was obvious the rapid, roaring Bronto would be done well before then.

Part of the site is along the Hitty Titty Brook, which was shrouded from view by tall, drooping trees until Bronto made its visit.

“The stuff grows fast,” Dumont said. “It was at the stage where you couldn’t see through it, but you knew (the brook) was there.”

Clearing the trees will also make it easier for wildlife to see and reach the brook and a nearby pond for drinking water, he said.

The work also provides more space for hikers, snowshoers and cross-country skiers who use the forest on a regular basis, Dumont said. Several people, including a couple on snowshoes, stopped by yesterday to chat and inquire about the large machine, he said.

“It’s a nice place to snowshoe,” he said. “I love it out here.”

Salem’s town forest, tucked off Shadow Lake Road, is a secret to many, Dumont said.

“A lot of people come down here and say, ‘I never knew this was here,’” he said.