



Updates from the Trail: December 2023

Species Spotlight: American Holly *Ilex opaca*

This past June, when the previous Land Stewardship Director, Jon Bruce, took me on a tour of BCT's signature properties he was particularly excited to show me BCT's most treasured trail: Eddy Bay. Jon was quick to point out the unique Holly grove found near the start of the trail. I was amazed when I first wandered through the Holly trees, after all, this was my first time seeing them grow in the wild; Holly trees are not a common sight in my home-state of Michigan! You will find American Holly trees from Massachusetts south to Florida and west to Texas and Missouri. With thick waxy leaves, green all year round, and shiny red berries, this evergreen truly sticks out from the rest and is a special part of the Cape Cod landscape.

When establishing a management plan for the Holly grove at the Eddy Bay trail, BCT received helpful recommendations from Cape Cod's "Holly Man" Bill Cannon. While Bill recently passed away, his legacy still lives on through all the Holly trees he has helped flourish across the Cape, including those at Eddy Bay. In addition, he had over 400 varieties of holly bushes and trees thriving at his property on Main Street in Brewster.



Traversing through the holly grove along the Eddy Bay trail



BCT volunteers pruning the Eddy Bay holly grove following the recommendations of Bill Cannon

Did you know that Holly trees are dioecious? Pollination from a male tree is necessary for the female trees to flower and produce the signature red berries. The flowers provide nectar and pollen for bees and other insects, while the Holly berries are an important winter food for wildlife, especially birds. In the winter, you may see Holly berries being eaten by wild turkeys, mourning doves, goldfinches, bobwhites, and cardinals, to name a few. While the wildlife loves these hard, bitter berries, they are not safe for human consumption. Birds typically wait for the berries to freeze and thaw several times before eating them, as this breaks down some of the toxic chemicals that the fruit contains.

In addition to its ecological importance, the American Holly is also a great native landscaping choice, if you have the space. The American Holly Tree grows slowly, but ultimately can grow 40-60 feet tall and remember you need to include both male and female trees in your landscape if you want the iconic red berries, which will attract wildlife to your yard and provide you with a source to deck your halls with "boughs of Holly".