In late May, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health assistant professor Joseph Allen put it bluntly: “This is going to be a very different summer.”

Even as many parks and preserves that closed in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic began reopening this spring, visitor access came with strict protocols designed not only to prevent viral spreading, but also to protect natural areas from damage caused by overcrowding. Further reopenings throughout the summer depend on visitors’ willingness to abide by the new rules. “Importantly, the burden is not just on parks and park rangers, but it’s also on people. And to get through this, it’s going to take a great deal of social trust,” Allen repeatedly emphasized during a press briefing after the release of Massachusetts governor Charlie Baker’s cautious, multi-phased reopening plan. “We should view going to parks and other activities that are starting to reopen as a privilege,” Allen added, “which can quickly be revoked.”

Like many conservation organizations, Mass Audubon kept its sites open early in the pandemic—until they became overrun. “We had a lot of visitors using sites as recreation areas,” reports Gail Yeo, vice president for wildlife sanctuaries and programs. People brought dogs, even where they are prohibited. Parked cars spilled out of lots, illegally jamming public roads. Landscapes outside the designated trails were being trampled—or used as rest rooms. “People were just really exploring in a way that was kind of exciting,” says Yeo, “but completely out of control.”

But she expected that most of the nonprofit’s 57 public sanctuaries would be reopened by mid June, with some, like the
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more popular Broadmoor, in Natick, and Ipswich River, in Topsfield, requiring advance day-of-visit online reservations to control the influx of visitors. Other properties that have already reopened, and do not require reservations, provide easy day-outings from Boston. Explore natural habitats and six miles of trails at Flat Rock Wildlife Sanctuary, in Fitchburg, which abuts the separate Crocker Conservation Area, with winding walks around the Overlook Reservoir. In Princeton, Wachusett Meadow Wildlife Sanctuary offers hilly paths through woods and meadows, unusual rock formations, and notable old-growth tree specimens. Take connecting trails to Wachusett Mountain and the Midstate Trail systems for more extensive, rigorous outings. Yeo also hopes that some small-scale programming, like guided nature walks and other family activities, will be available this summer.

The Trustees of Reservations, a Massachusetts-based nonprofit conservation organization, had opened the grounds of 91 of its 118 outdoor sites at press time, although its house (and other) museums, buildings, and most bathrooms will remain closed for the foreseeable future, according to director of public relations Aaron Gouveia. Access to especially popular properties—deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Fruitlands Museum, Naumkeag, World’s End, and the idyllic Crane Beach—is available only through advance online reservations. (That policy applies to Trustees members and non-members alike.)

Head to Fruitlands, in Harvard, for country walks, mountain views, and picnics. At deCordova, in Lincoln, stroll expansive

Enjoy a quiet forest hike at Royalston Falls.
in secluded wildlife habitats, study birds, mammals, and plants, roam linked hiking trails, or pedal on more than 13 miles of paved paths. But note that the park’s popular campgrounds were closed as of press time, as were all the DCR-managed campgrounds across the state. (Discussions were under way about whether and how to possibly open them safely later in the season.)

Closer to Boston, the Middlesex Fells Reservation offers wild woods, shady pine-tree routes along reservoirs, and plenty of less-trammeled corners throughout more than 100 miles of walking, biking, and hiking trails. Northwest of Boston, DCR’s Box- ford State Forest and Harold Parker State Forest offer endless exploration, and are adjacent to at least 10 other smaller protected landscapes and woodlands also worth visiting. Operated by the city of Lynn, the 2,200-acre Lynn Woods Reservation, founded in 1881, is the second-largest municipal park in the country. The natural haven offers a real retreat from urban life, but is relatively easy to reach by bike—via the seven-and-a-half-mile Bike to the Sea/Northern Strand Com-
crowds were arriving at trailheads, including many newer hikers ill-prepared for weather and climbing conditions. For those novices, he recommends learning more about outdoor adventuring online through AMC. But he also emphasizes that too many trekkers may cause irreparable damage to trails and threaten wildlife habitats and other ecologically sensitive environments that AMC is charged with stewarding. “We want people to get outdoors and connect with nature, at this time more than ever, and we believe people need it—it’s a shot in the arm spiritually, mentally, physically,” he acknowledges. “That said,” he adds, “we are working with the New England states, Maine and New Hampshire especially, to figure out how people can come up to Grafton Loop [38.6-mile backcountry hiking in the Mahoosuc Mountains] and Mount Lafayette and Franconia Ridge [Lincoln, New Hampshire] without the trails becoming like one of those clear days on Mount Everest where you’ve got people back-to-back waiting to summit.”

In an initial response to COVID-19, AMC closed its alpine huts for the first time in 132 years and its 12 summer-camping and cabin properties. But in late May, it opened reservations for these lodging sites: Gorman Chairback and Medawisla (in Maine), and the Highland Center at Crawford Notch, Joe Dodge Lodge at Pinkham Notch, and Cardigan Lodge (in New Hampshire). All were slated to start housing hikers as of July 1—with varying controls over food service and restrooms, and guest rooms occupied at half capacity. Judge does expect packed parking lots and streams of day-hikers, and therefore advises planning non-weekend excursions—or, better yet, opting instead for outdoor locales much closer to home, where the rewards of nature are often just as beautiful and restorative. “You can see some of the world’s most beautiful outdoors and wilderness,” he says, “right here in New England.”
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