

MICROBURST DESTROYS GOSS OAKS

By
Jonathan Katz

It must have been terrifying. On July 31, 2009, around 4:00 p.m. The same windstorm that destroyed the trees on Pine Orchard Country Club (POCC) slammed into the tall oaks on the Land Trust's Goss property. Blasts of wind uprooted or snapped off around 20 mature hardwoods along a 200-foot wide swath. The shattered trees fell west to east in a tangled blowdown stretching from the edge of the golf course and going downhill to the railroad tracks. They lie roughly parallel, roots to the east, crowns to the west, presenting a vast and awkward tangle of trunks, leaders, branches, twisted wreckage, across the walking paths in the Goss property.

The wind broke off a huge oak, 77 inches round, twenty-four inches in diameter, leaving a stump fifteen feet high. Imagine the sound, the pelting rain and roaring wind, and suddenly a great "SNAP!" and a tremendous, rending crunch as the wind drove the tree horizontally into the ground, crushing the lesser trees and saplings underneath. Two twelve inch thick oaks crashed down nearby, their trunks parallel, less than five feet apart. They had been snapped like pencils, ten or fifteen feet up. To the south and slightly uphill, a 16 inch oak uprooted, fell onto an 18 inch tree, and the two slammed into the ground together, wrenching up the forest floor at a 90 degree angle. Still another tree was uprooted. It was 18 inches thick, perhaps 50 feet tall, weighing many tons, balanced precariously on a shallow dish of roots woven into sand. When it fell it lifted a flat chunk of earth, ten feet wide and three feet thick, revealing, oddly, the dried, shed skin of a small snake. These huge trees have such small, shallow root balls, yet they hold strongly. Few were uprooted, most were broken in half.

Two mature trees, partly wrenched from the soil, are still "hung up," in the branches of others. They will balance there until something breaks, and the trunks fall on whatever lies beneath. These two trees, and many other broken limbs high above, are a hanging menace of potential energy—"widow makers".

What wind can snap a two-foot thick oak tree? Probably, a gust of 100 miles an hour, as estimated by the National Weather Service, which tracked the storm that took out the Goss oaks. On July 31, in just a few moments, that kind of savage wind swept down in Branford, snapping and uprooting big trees, laying waste to a peaceable forest. A hiker, facing such fury of nature, would have been lucky to survive.

EDITOR'S NOTES:

1. We would like to remind people about the dangers posed by damaged trees that are in risk of falling and the need to look for and avoid them when walking on the trails.

2. Many of the trees that blocked the Goss trail were actually on POCC property. The Goss trails, as well as POCC property have now been cleared. Indian Neck Pine Orchard Co. 9, one of the Branford fire companies, cleared those on Goss as a practice exercise. We appreciate their undertaking this project!

3. As we reported in the last newsletter, over 20 trees on the Vedder property south of the Trolley Trail were toppled or broken. Also, the osprey platform on the west side of the Vedder property was destroyed.