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Oswegatchie Group Celebrates Year Of Land Acquisitions

By Suzanne Thompson, *Times* Staff Writer

Walks in the Woods - Friends produce Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve Trail Guide Published on 10/11/2007



Photo credit - Tim Cook *The Day*

It's time to head for the hills as another New England fall is coloring up. The Friends of the Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve (FOHNP) and the town of East Lyme encourage residents and visitors to enjoy the natural splendor, wildlife, and solitude of the 400-acre preserve that runs parallel to the west bank of the Niantic River.

The Friends organization has produced a concise two-page guide to the preserve to help visitors plan for a wide variety of passive recreational pursuits on the varied terrain. Visitors to the preserve can find black and white copies in waterproof boxes at the head of marked trails and the main entrance behind Veterans Field off Route 161. They also can stop by the town clerk's office at Town Hall and the East Lyme Library for copies, or download and print a color copy of the brochure on this website at www.eltownhall.com.

Passive recreation means enjoying, observing, and perhaps photographing nature, birds, wildlife, flora, and fauna. No motorized vehicles, hunting, camping, alcoholic beverages, or fires are allowed; picnicking is welcomed as long as visitors

remove all litter. Dogs are permitted, but owners are reminded to help protect wildlife and their young from boisterous domesticated pets.

Hikes along the preserve's many miles of marked trails wind through terrain that ranges from Clark Pond near the entrance of the preserve to the more challenging, steeper trails in the middle section of the hills. These trails are along the rocky ridges and ravines running parallel to the Niantic River that were dug out by ice age glaciers.

Not to be missed is the "Lunar Landscape" area in the western highlands of the area. Near Mount Tabor, the highest point in the hills, two abandoned rock quarries worked in the 1800s provide choice spots for picnics as well as archeological exploration. Although the preserve does not contain any Niantic River frontage, it provides visitors seasonal vistas of Niantic River, Smith Cove, and Niantic Bay.

The trail guide recommends staying on the marked and mapped trails, noting that the many unmarked trails in the hills "WILL get you lost." Blazing, or maintaining, the trails is an ongoing service provided by Friends and East Lyme Land Trust volunteers.

Passive recreation and environmental preservation are the dual goals of the Friends organization formed in 2001 to raise public awareness and gain the funds necessary to purchase the remaining undeveloped land in the hills. The group's ultimate objective is to create a nature preserve of 700 acres for future generations to enjoy.

The Friends organization was incorporated and became a 501(c)(3) organization in 2001 after Marvin Schutt and Michael Dunn, residents of Saunders Point in Niantic, wrote a letter to the editor of The Day requesting others to join its efforts. It has grown from a small grassroots group of a dozen people in 2004 to more than 600 members. Membership is based on ongoing donations of \$20 to \$500 to cover operating expenses. Larger contributions can be made for future land purchases.

All board members and committee members are volunteers, many serving on multiple committees and projects. Schutt serves as president and chair of community outreach. Dunn is vice president and land acquisition committee chair. Denise Garofalo is capital campaign chair. Directors Paul Whitehouse and Carl Stamm provide ongoing management of the nature preserve, following a management plan that defines the responsibilities for ongoing management and future public use of the land. This plan was signed by the Friends, the East Lyme Land Trust, and First Selectman Beth Hogan on behalf of East Lyme.

Early on, Dunn said, the group was fortunate to get advice from George Milne, retired senior vice president of Pfizer Global Research and Development, who serves as honorary director.

“George was the one who recommended we partner with the town of East Lyme to purchase our first property,” said Dunn, referring to a strategically located 65-acre parcel known as the Gardiner property near the center of the preserve. The Friends acquired that land for \$290,000 and sold it to the town for half of that price, while retaining a conservation easement that protects the land from future development.

The organization has continually sought community support for its preservation efforts. In April 2005, town residents voted 300 to 2 in favor of a \$2 million bonding resolution for preservation of open space. Schutt said it was this unprecedented show of local support that paved the way for the Connecticut legislature to approve a \$2 million bond to purchase land in Oswegatchie Hills.

The Friends also has become a member of a Partnership for Preservation with the town, the state, and the federal government, as well as the Trust for Public Land, a national nonprofit land conservation organization. The Friends credit then-First Selectman Wayne Fraser for establishing the initial partnership.

As of November 2006, the Friends report that 288 acres of open space had been acquired for the preserve. This includes additional state grants of \$919,800 and federal grants of \$830,000. The Friends contributed \$345,000 and continues to work with the TPL to acquire remaining properties from other landowners in the area.

“This would never have gotten done without the Trust for Public Land’s involvement,” Schutt said. Founded in 1972, it is second in size to The Nature Conservancy in land preservation efforts around the world. The trust has paid for required appraisals of land, as well as advocated in Washington and Hartford on behalf of the preserve.

Dunn said it is the Friends' stated goal to purchase at fair market value the 236 acres to the north owned by developer Glenn Russo. This parcel, which extends to Boston Post Road (Route 1) east of I-95, includes about a mile of saltwater frontage on the Niantic River. Russo's latest proposal for developing the land is before the East Lyme Zoning Commission.

The FOHNP has been designated an intervener, representing the public trust or public interest in the environment, in ongoing consideration of development proposals. It is sharing legal costs with the Save

the River-Save the Hills organization. Fred Grimsey is president of STR-STH, and Deb Moshier-Dunn, Michael's wife, is vice president.