



Friends of the
OSWEGATCHIE HILLS
NATURE PRESERVE

Newsletter – 4th Quarter 2024

Oswegatchie Hills Fires Close Nature Preserve for the 1st Time.

A severe and unusual drought along with two brushfires within eight days of each other forced the temporary closure of the OH nature preserve for the first time. The fires on October 28th and November 5th Election Day, elicited a huge response from town, regional and statewide firefighters. Also responding was a US forestry helicopter from Maine, as well as firefighters from as far away as Quebec and Cal Fire.

A quick response from the East Lyme Fire Service and light winds helped contain the first fire, which impacted about an acre and was adjacent to the Blue Trail. The second fire, which occurred on the Green Trail on a windier day, was harder to contain, according to firefighters. As a result, a section of that trail will be permanently closed due to damage from the fire and the need to trench, cut brush and trees to create a fire line.

Greg Decker, FOHNP Stewardship Chair, assisted firefighters by unlocking the entrance nearest to the fire and guiding them to the scene. Decker said, “If this had been a windy day the fire would have been wind-swept and consumed a much larger portion of the preserve and threatened surrounding homes.” He also noted that the stewardship committee was in the process of enhancing its fire and emergency response plan just weeks before the fires occurred. New board and Stewardship Committee member, Dave Baer, who also serves as the President of the East Lyme Ambulance Fund, was the liaison between the fire department and the FOHNP Stewardship Committee. Dave said “It is ironic that we had just started to review our response plan, however I am grateful that the existing plans that the fire department had in place worked flawlessly, and we are thankful that their quick response limited the impact to the preserve.” Decker also said, “Thankfully this was not a repeat of the 1962 fire which consumed over 400 acres of the Oswegatchie Hills.”



10/28 and 11/5 Fires and Aftermath



Photo from 10/28 fire



Parts of the Green Trail will be permanently closed



Smoke from 11/5 fire



Burned Area

Pitch Pine Project Supports Sustainability CT Award

A recent article in the Day Paper had reported that 43 towns in Connecticut were recipients of the “Sustainability CT Award” a program that recognizes communities that have taken steps to become more sustainable. East Lyme was recognized as a climate leader, its third consecutive award, the other two being at the bronze level. The award was championed by a frequent Friends volunteer and Conservation Commission Chair, Penny Howell. The application included a forestry initiative component for which Penny used the Friends Pitch Pine Conservation Project as a qualifier.

The Friends Stewardship Committee is currently raising 50 Pitch Pines saplings started from seeds that were collected from pinecones in the Pitch Pines Park. Plans are to plant the saplings on the ridgetops where the current Pitch Pines are thriving but threatened by encroaching chestnut oaks.

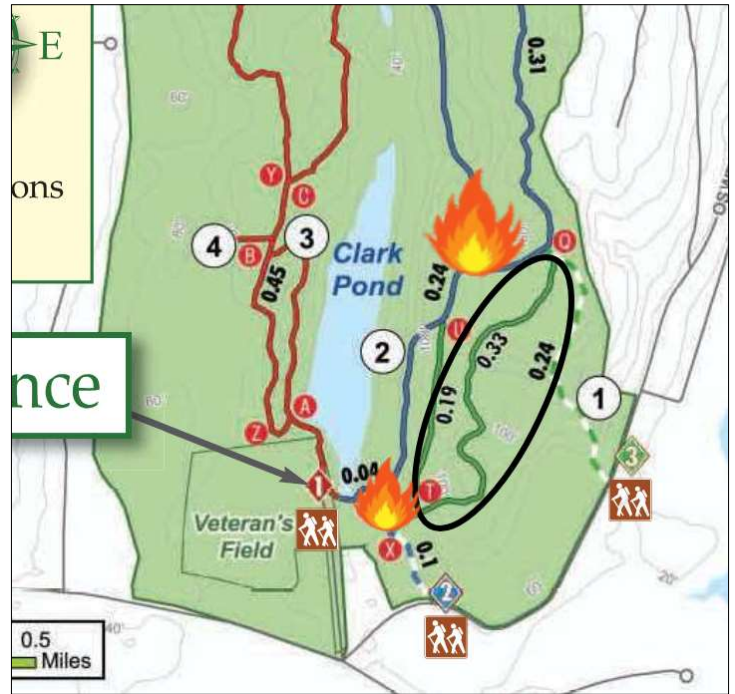


Pitch Pine Seedlings

Green Trail Section to be Temporarily Closed

A section of the Green Trail is temporarily closed and rerouted from trail intersection location markers T to Q. A steep section of the trail sustained significant disruption due to the need to create a fire line in combating the November 5th Election Day fire. The closed area will be roped off with signage until the trail can be rerouted and mapped. Greg Decker said, "The fire has given us an opportunity to reroute and improve a steep section of the green Trail that was always too steep and had an erosion problem."

The stewardship committee is currently evaluating and looking for an alternative route that will include more interesting rock features, a gentler slope and not prone to erosion. "In the reroute, we will be looking to include a large glacial boulder, which contains a small plaque dedicated to Marvin Schutt, cofounder of the Friends," Decker said.



The impacted fire areas and closed green trail (inside black oval)

Thanks Tony @ Fast Signs



Tony Sabilia, owner of *Fast Signs* in Waterford, twice, donated signage needed to keep hikers informed of the status of the preserve. We appreciate his generosity and fast fabrication of the signs that greatly helped us manage

the preserve after the fire.

Golden Rule of Ecology

"A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."

~ Aldo Leopold (from *Coyote America*)

Why Now?

This year, Connecticut has experienced unusually dry conditions throughout the late summer and early fall, moving much of the state into drought status. The Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) has been closely monitoring the situation, issuing drought alerts for various regions. Our area, in particular, faced "extreme" drought conditions until it was lifted on November 21st.



The dry weather significantly increased the risk of wildfires. The National Weather Service issued a state-wide **red flag warning**, signaling critical fire weather conditions. A red flag warning means that low humidity, high winds, and dry vegetation create an elevated risk for wildfire outbreaks. This season the state of CT has battled over 50 fires, many in the Southeastern region.

Letter from the President

When my husband and I were in Seattle many years ago, we watched an I-Max presentation on the eruption of Mt. Saint Helens. The eruption occurred in 1980, and as you may recall, the devastation was unimaginable. Nearly 150 square miles of forest was blown over or left dead, and the surrounding landscape was dramatically changed within moments.



Obviously the recent fires in the Preserve hardly compare to the destruction caused by a volcanic eruption, and fortunately they did not do the damage that the fire in 1962 did. But what is important about both of these events is that nature recovered – all on its own. A few weeks after the eruption a group of scientists headed out in a helicopter to view the devastation. When they landed to inspect more closely, they discovered, to their amazement, that tiny green shoots were already emerging from the ash. Nature has a way of doing that. This is the reason that the trees and shrubs that were damaged or cut down in order to bring the fires under control will not be removed. We will let nature takes its course.

“Nature does not hurry yet everything is accomplished.”

~ Lao Tzu

Kris Lambert

Letter of Thanks

Published in The Day, November 11, 2024

On behalf of the Friends of the Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve, I want to acknowledge the incredible response to the recent fire in the Hills by the East Lyme Fire Department and all the other regional, state, and federal departments involved. From the first alert of a fire on the Blue Trail to the ongoing presence of firefighters throughout the day of the fire and until the fire was completely extinguished, the coordinated effort to control and contain the fire was truly impressive. Firefighters worked tirelessly to kill the fire, monitor hotspots and ensure the safety of the area. We were sorry to learn, though, that three firefighters were injured and hope that they have recovered fully.

This extraordinary response to what could have been a major, destructive event in the preserve underscores the vital role our first responders play. We in East Lyme, and indeed in the entire region, are very fortunate to have such dedicated professionals and volunteers. Thank you for your service.

Kristin Lambert
President, Friends of the Oswegatchie Nature Preserve