

Nature: East Lyme Preserve Features Pink Granite Quarry, Gorgeous Overlooks



By **Peter Marteka**
Nature's Path & Way To Go

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There are several translations for the Native American Iroquois word "Oswegatchie." Some define it as "black water" or "black river," while others say it means "at the outlet." But the translation that works the best for the 400-acre nature preserve called Oswegatchie overlooking the Niantic River is "coming or going around a hill."

You're actually exploring two hills separated by a deep hollow when you visit East Lyme's Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve — one of the largest swaths of open space along our highly developed shoreline. More than three miles of trails pass through an abandoned pink granite quarry, twist through blueberry bushes over a high hill and lead to overlooks of a picturesque pond where turtles bask in the sun on top of granite boulders.

This is one of those rugged places found where you least expect it. As you navigate the clearly marked green-, blue-, red-, yellow- and orange-blazed trails, expect to leave a piece of your hiking spirit here. While it is at times demanding, there are plenty of places where the trail levels off and an explorer can catch his breath and wipe his brow before tackling the next rock ledge.

On this journey, I took what I call the "points of interest" trail. I mapped out my journey so I would visit the quarry — where I spent the most time exploring — as well as the vistas, overlooks and the top of Mount Tabor. Unfortunately, the most dreaded two words in spring and summer hiking — seasonal views — popped up while I was at the overlooks.

At 243 feet, Mount Tabor is the highest point in the preserve and offers views of the Niantic River, the **Long Island Sound** and Fishers Island. And although the top of the hill is populated mostly by scrub oak and pitch pines, they are just high enough, and at this time of year have enough leaves, to block much of the view — unless you are an enterprising hiker and climb the numerous boulders at the top of Mount Tabor, get up on your tippy-toes and strain your neck. Ah, beautiful view.

My favorite spot, along the yellow trail, is an old granite quarry opened by Simon Smith in 1815 so he could build a stone house. Although it was abandoned nearly a century ago after sending its pink granite near and far, visitors can walk through the quarry and see piles of rocks with chisel marks on them where the stone was shorn away from the daunting cliffs. There are plenty of places to explore or eat a picnic lunch on top of the flat rocks.

Other scenic spots are on the blue and red trails around the man-made Clark Pond, created so fishing vessels could have ice in their hulls to preserve their catch. There are several short, side trails to vistas overlooking the sparkling pond. The preserve is filled with pockets of mountain laurel groves that soon will showcase why it is the state flower.

Rocks are the star attraction at Oswegatchie Hills, whether they are pink granite, daunting ridges or balancing boulders. As the map kiosk points out, the preserve "provides recreation and respite in perpetuity." Even if some leaves get in the way of a sound view.

•Take I-95 to exit 74, and take Route 161 south to Veterans' Memorial Park. A map kiosk at the preserve trailhead will help plan your journey. Visit www.oswhills.org for a color map of the preserve.

•Peter Marteka can be reached by phone at 860-647-5365; by mail at The Courant, 200 Adams St., Manchester, CT 06040; and by e-mail at pmarteka@courant.com.

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