

THE EAST HAMPTON STAR

SHINES FOR ALL

Nature Notes: The Riches of Point Woods

A wonderful mishmash of upland and swamp forest

By Larry Penny | April 4, 2012 - 10:09am



Larry Penny visited Point Woods in Montauk recently with Andrew Geller, above, of Queens College and the Long Island Botanical Society. Vicki Bustamante

Some of you may remember when Camp Hero was still in possession of the federal government and when President Ronald Reagan tried to sell it to the highest bidder. The Concerned Citizens of Montauk showed up in force at the bidding site in New York City and put the kibosh on the sale. Simultaneously, Tony Bullock was working with Senator Moynahan's office to have it become public land. And it did!

More than 10 years before that triumph, Hilda Lindley and C.C.O.M. talked Suffolk County into buying the land across the street, now known as Theodore Roosevelt County Park. In the early 1990s while Mr. Bullock was East Hampton Town supervisor, New York State purchased a large chunk of undeveloped moorlands next door to Camp Hero known as the Sanctuary, formerly in the hands of mob interests, and another 300-plus

acres of open space was added to the growing Montauk parklands between Lake Montauk and Montauk Point.

Aside from an attempt by the state to later convert a large part of Camp Hero's undeveloped land and, presumably, some of the Sanctuary, into a golf course, the land has remained in its natural state, bounded on the south side by Old Montauk Highway and the ocean and on the north side by Montauk Point State Parkway.

Such acquisition would have greatly pleased Norman Taylor, who studied the flora of Montauk in the early part of the 20th century and published his findings in a work put out in 1923 by the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, "The Vegetation of Montauk: A Study of Grassland and Forest." The "forest" referred to in the title was the only one in Montauk at that time, as the rest of Montauk was still grazing land. It was known as "the Point Woods" and consisted of the western part of Camp Hero and most of the Sanctuary. He would also be pleased to know that almost 80 years later the Point Woods is largely intact, many of the trees are well over a century old, as big around as a 55-gallon drum, and as tall as the South Fork's only high-rise building, situated in downtown Montauk at the edge of Fort Pond, the South Fork's biggest freshwater body.

On Friday I had the pleasure of visiting that wonderful mishmash of upland and swamp forest with Andrew Geller of Queens College and the Long Island Botanical Society and Vicki Bustamante for the first time in more than 10 years. Like the late Norman Taylor, Dr. Geller is, perhaps, the living botanist most familiar with Long Island's diverse flora and has described it in copious scientific works. He wanted to see the only spot on Long Island where one of Long Island's premier naturalists had described American beech and red maple with two very different ecological niches, one dry, one wet, thriving shoulder to shoulder, strange bedfellows as it were. He was pleasantly rewarded, as we all were.

The Point Woods is not only a monument to Long Island's botanical riches, it is a wonderful grouping of several microhabitats — vernal ponds, swamps, fens, streams, hillocks, tall tree assemblages, shrubby woods, and ferny glades. It is also dotted with

numerous boulders, glacial erratics, that have remained in place in the very same spots where they were dropped by the retreating and melting glacier some 15,000 years or more ago, their bases surrounded by morainal soils. They add a fourth botanical dimension to the woods, as they are largely covered with lichens of many different kinds, enjoying the freshest and most unpolluted air on Long Island, 100 miles distant from the city. Lichens don't fare well in urban and industrial environments.

This lush potpourri of microhabitats is just the place for state-designated rare blue-spotted and four-toed salamanders, spotted turtles, ornate butterflies, and unusual breeding birds in season. It is a good place for breeding woodcocks and the last place on the South Fork where in 1992 while marking the Sanctuary wetlands I flushed a ruffed grouse. We saw and heard several yellow warblers, observed a brown creeper creeping upward on a large tupelo, and encountered several other bird species, as well.

As South Fork forests go, the Point Woods is as diverse as the Stony Hill woods in Amagansett. It has many of the same trees, including black birch, tupelo, mockernut and pignut hickories, American beech, eastern cottonwood, smooth and Canada shads, Bebbs willow, pussy willow, red maple, juniper, American holly, two species of hawthorn, witch-hazel, alternate-leaved dogwood, black cherry, elderberry, hop hornbeam, and many oaks — black, scarlet, white, and two species of red oaks, the northern and the southern. Montauk may be the only place on Long Island where the last-named species has gained a foothold. Except for the very occasional eastern red cedar at the edges, the only evergreens present were the hollies and mountain laurels.

The understory species include mountain laurel, highbush blueberry, spicebush, sweet pepperbush, winterberry holly, alder, chokeberry, bayberry, and sumacs. You would have to crawl on your knees for miles and miles to find a single huckleberry or a single lowbush blueberry, so common in most other Long Island woods including those on the South Fork. The hollies and mountain laurels were fully green and vigorous in aspect.

A variety of mosses cover much of the ground, especially where it is wet and at the edges of small streams. The rare-to-Long Island aquatic moss, *fontinalis*, formed

patches of long “green hair” flowing with the current in part of the stream. There isn’t a tree trunk without patches of lichens in many different hues and textures. The trails, in part maintained by the East Hampton Trails Preservation Society, meander through the myriad of habitats, passing over streams and around the wettest areas. The swales are dotted with lush skunk cabbages, almost all of which had already bloomed. Sedges, rushes, and other wetland plants were just starting to poke up their culms and stems.

The only lanais were native and few and far between — fox grape and poison ivy. What really pleased us was the fact that, while the rest of Montauk is host to hordes of invasive weedy plants, there were very few littering the Point Woods. We found some phragmites, some privet, some honeysuckle, and a few other exotics in a few small disturbed sites, but no bittersweet, no Japanese knotweed, no mugwort, no boxwood.

At the end of our two-hour field trip we were happy to know that the Point Woods had not been turned into a golf course and never will be, and that, with a few additions, it is probably very much like it was when seen through the eyes of Norman Taylor.