



connections

*The newsletter of the Massachusetts
Greenways and Trails Program*

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High Ground Greenways: Massachusetts Ridges, Ranges and Summits

By Jack Lash, Former DCR Ecologist

Spring is here in our corner of the northern hemisphere, and as often as I can manage it, I am headed to high ground. While the word “mountains” may be a bit of exaggeration for Massachusetts, we do have our share of scenic, sacred and special ridges, ranges and summits, from Mt Greylock to the Holyoke Range to the Great Blue Hill. For me, as a former DCR Ecologist, many of these are former work sites, and it is a special opportunity for me to get reacquainted with the aromas of crisp air and spruce/fir, fabulous panoramas, and juncos who left my yard months ago.



These “high places” in Massachusetts are notable and worthy of our attention for several reasons. First, the DCR and other public and private organizations have protected them over generations through creative and timely acquisitions for us to visit, explore and cherish. Second, much of the flora and fauna on the summits and ranges in our Commonwealth have adapted to the conditions at higher elevations, making them unique. And finally, there are new trends we need to be aware of that play out up there among the ravens and the cinquefoil.

Recreation and Exploration

Summits, ridges and ranges are not only scenic landscape features upon which we gaze from our valley towns and highways below, but they are also exciting features to explore from the top.

West to east, there are seven long-distance, hiking paths in Massachusetts that traverse our high ground, the Taconic, Appalachian (AT), Mahican-Mohawk, Pocumtuc, Metacomet-Monadnock (M&M), Midstate, and Warner Trails. The National Parks Service, DCR, and several other organizations have long recognized the existing and potential popularity of these grand greenways. Acquisitions of these valuable vistas and linear links they create began more than a century ago. Those efforts have been admirable and continuous. Today, approximately 50% of these long-distance trail corridors is protected, and just last month the President designated the Metacomet Monadnock Trail as a National Scenic Trail recognizing its value and beauty.

Each of these greenways has its own special attractions, and people one encounters on these trails are more than willing to provide an answer to the simple question, "How's it going?" On Alander Mountain along the Taconic Trail in far western Massachusetts, a hiker there with a heavy pack responded to my greeting with, "Great...my 3rd trek here this year." The AT, with all its publicity, popularity and 89 miles in Massachusetts, allows one to meet "through-hikers" as often as day trekkers. I asked one young couple what time they had started when I met them on the path near Beartown State Forest a few years ago. "February 27, in Georgia!" was their proud response. On the porch at Skinner State Park, Mount Holyoke, just last spring, a Dad and daughter beamed a smile worth more than a cell-phone photo, as a Broad-winged Hawk circled by at eye level.

Unique Ecology

While it is the exercise, the views and the trail access that enables us to appreciate many summits and ranges, it is the flora and fauna of Massachusetts high ground that makes them truly special. On Mount Greylock, two rare plants and the fir-breeding Blackpoll Warblers are not found anywhere else in the state. The Massachusetts Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program rightfully calls them "Legacy Species." Mount Tom is home to 83% of all amphibians and reptiles living in Massachusetts (excluding sea turtles). Near the Midstate Trail on Mount Wachusett State Reservation, studies have revealed that amphibians are 15-20% more robust in size and weight, than anywhere else in the Commonwealth. A healthy stand of spruce, increasing through natural regeneration on Mount Watatic, may soon host the state's first breeding Boreal Chickadees, and alpine-loving Gray Jays have visited the summit during fall hawk migration three years running.

In the eastern half of the state, the Blue Hills Reservation, near the north end of the Warner Trail, hosts rare reptiles, and I heard, they found a rare Lawrence's (hybrid) warbler just last month on the Wrentham portion of the Warner. If one favors species abundance as well as diversity, that trail also features a growing population of all three Lycopodium species in woodlands high above the Neponset River.

Plants and animals adapt, probably better than humans do. At higher elevations, along these high ground linear corridors, the ecological diversity is there for the viewing, photographing, and scientific research. Why do White-throated sparrows migrate vertically to mate? How do spindly woodrush species tolerate frost, high winds and booming thunderstorms? Our high ground is where we seek and enjoy the answers.

Coming Trends

Unfortunately, there are some trends that threaten both our permanently protected and unprotected summits, ridges and ranges in Massachusetts. Invasive species are increasing at higher elevations, even in undeveloped areas. And with climate change, many native and exotic species are migrating up and down and along these landscape features. While there is beginning to be a collaborative, ongoing effort to deal with invasive plant species on high ground, the process is long-term, and the outcome, unknown. Monitoring species migrations and invasions needs to be on-going, frequent and widely shared so that these trends can be tracked.

Wind turbines are coming, some to high ground, and the Secretary of the Environment has highlighted DCR lands for energy development. Blades are getting longer, towers taller, and installation and service roads bigger. While the single-stem pedestals upon which the blades eventually perch are a vast improvement over trussed towers, (the latter were suspected to cause collisions and mortality during bird migration), more study is needed and impacts are inevitable. Monitoring, before, during and after turbine installation, will hopefully enable individuals and agencies managing summits and ridges to help protect resources – both natural and historic – near these power plants.

As pressures on our high ground increase, be it from climate change or energy development, the continued protection and careful management of these sacred places becomes all the more important. This will require support and collaboration from neighboring communities, recreation users, activists, scientists, and agencies alike. Don't hesitate to help.

Tips and Tools

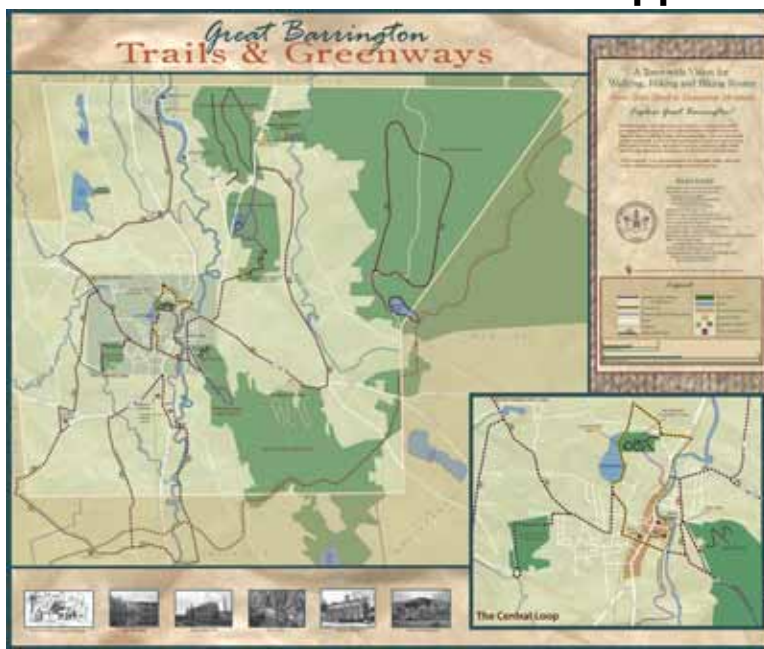
(Resources, links, and publications)

Ecological Significance of Mt Everett Summit

<http://www.mteverett.org/studies/PreliminaryReport.pdf>.

Trails Add Value to New Homes <http://www.americantrails.org/resources/devel/Trail-system-community-developer-investment-return-Martin.html>

National Park Service Invites Applications for Assistance



The National Park Service, through its Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program (RTCA) works with communities and local organizations to plan and implement locally-led outdoor recreation trail and natural resource conservation projects. August 1 is the application deadline for the next round of RTCA assistance.

Applicants are strongly encouraged to discuss project ideas with National Park Service before submitting an application. Contact Charles Tracy charles_tracy@nps.gov 617 223 5210 or visit www.nps.gov/rtca for more information.

In Massachusetts, one of the projects RTCA is assisting is Great Barrington Trails and Greenways, a collaborative effort promoting the development of an interconnected town-wide trail system for walking, biking and paddling. After working for two years with RTCA on organizing volunteer trail projects, creating a trails "vision map" (<http://gbtrails.org/vision-map/>), and sponsoring guided hikes and other community events, the project has built a strong local alliance that includes public health, local schools, historic preservation, recreation, and land conservation. In January 2009, it was invited by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy to participate in their Gateway Community Program which supports activities designed to further strengthen physical and programmatic connections between the Appalachian National Scenic Trail and their community. For more information, check out their new website (www.gbtrails.org)

On the Trail Ahead

(Upcoming Events)

National Trails Day: June 6, 2009. Get involved in supporting trails. More information at <http://www.americanhiking.org/NTD.aspx>.

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Please forward to others who might be interested in Massachusetts Greenways and Trails.



Connections is the electronic newsletter from the Department of Conservation and Recreation's Greenways and Trails Program,

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www.mass.gov/dcr/stewardship/greenway/index.htm

Deval Patrick, Governor

Tim Murray, Lieutenant Governor

Ian Bowles, Secretary, Energy and Environmental Affairs

Rick Sullivan, Commissioner, Department of Conservation and Recreation