

A SPRING WALK THROUGH MUTTONTOWN PRESERVE

AL and LOIS LINDBERG

Muttontown Park and Preserve, in northeastern Nassau County, is an oasis of rolling fields and woodlands, over five hundred acres of protected land in the middle of ever-spreading suburban developments. Ponds, wet woods, conifer stands, hedgerows, almost all of Long Island's major ecological habitats except a bog and a seashore, can be found here. Back from the entrance on Muttontown Lane is the small Nature Center building. Pick up a trail map and continue on for a spring walk through Muttontown Preserve.

The path behind the Nature Center follows the fence line border of the Wet Woods, a low, swampy area. Red maples are dominant here, with arrowwood viburnum as the main understory shrub. The soggy ground is interrupted by hummocks of sedge and cinnamon fern, the fiddleheads emerging by mid-April. Patches of jewelweed will attain their full height soon, lining the path until the first frost of autumn.

Human intrusion into the adjacent field is usually met by the cluck of a pheasant or the call note of the Bobwhite. Several other birds find a home here. For the past three years, a White-eyed Vireo has built her nest in the hedgerow between the Wet Woods and this field. Last April brought with it a new discovery. Mounds of loose, sandy soil, similar to small ant hills but much larger, covered the field. They were built by solitary, burrowing bees of the family Andrenidae. In the back quarter of this field lies a hill known locally as Round Top. It is a fitting name, as this is a conical mound, or kame, deposited by a glacial stream some 15,000 years ago. The base of the kame provides a good vantage point. To the southwest, the topography rises to meet the Harbor Hill terminal moraine which runs through the preserve.

These fields south of Round Top evoke memories of warm evenings in late April. A walk at dusk is a medley of sounds and movements—the shrill call of the spring peepers, the final notes of a Yellow Warbler, a flock of Canada Geese about to settle down for the night, flying so low that we can almost feel the breeze of their wingbeats. Finally, we hear what we came for, the nasal *peent* of a male woodcock trying to impress a nearby female. The male flies up, silhouetted against the darkening sky, his twittering descent bringing him within a few feet of his observers.

Old farm fields, now reclaimed by wildflowers, form most of the eastern border of the preserve. Woodland flowers must bloom in the spring to take advantage of sunlight filtered through new foliage, but the plants of the fields are in no such hurry. Summer and early fall are a field's peak seasons. Queen Anne's lace, vetch, black-eyed Susan, and chicory first present their colors by June, while the gerardias, heath asters, goldenrods, and New England asters of August linger well into September and early October, much appreciated by the migrating clouds of monarch butterflies.

From the fields, the right-hand fork enters the back of "Seven Ponds Woods," named for the numerous seasonal kettle ponds within this area. The first day of spring, regardless of what the calendar says, is proclaimed throughout these woods by the noisy croak of the wood frog and the piercing voice of *Hyla crucifer*, our smallest frog with the loudest sound. Seven Ponds Woods provides a study in contrasts. The northern portion is a true red-maple swamp. A clay layer close to the ground surface prevents any rainwater from penetrating too far down, keeping the soil constantly moist. The area of transition to higher ground shows the widest diversity, with a mixture of both wet-soil and dry-soil plant associations. The well-drained land in the southern portion of the woods indicates a change to a dry upland community dominated by red and white oaks. Three years ago, in February 1976, a pair of Great Horned Owls raised two young in this deciduous woodlot. The female's choice of a nest site in a large red oak provided an excellent opportunity to observe the owls at a distance without unduly disturbing them. In other years, Broad-winged Hawks have also nested in this woods.

A change of soil types may be indicated not only by a replacement of one genus of plants by another, but also by different species within a single genus. On one gentle northwest slope in this oak woods, three species of clubmoss (*Lycopodium*) occur within one hundred feet of each other, yet each is distinctly separate. *L. complanatum* occupies the lower third of the hillside, at the edge of a path where the soil is sandy. *L. obscurum*, preferring damp, open woods, dominates the middle section where the clay content in the soil holds more moisture. A small patch of *L. clavatum*, one of the least common species of clubmoss on Long Island, is situated almost at the crest of the hill, in an area of loose, acid soil.

The trail from the Seven Ponds Woods again enters the fields along Route 106, the eastern boundary. Horseback riders using the pre-

serve's bridle paths may take advantage of the three exercise rings located here; less frequently, bluebirds and meadowlarks take advantage of the habitat provided by this regularly mowed field. The short grasses have also attracted more unusual species such as Savannah Sparrows and Water Pipits.

From here, the lane to the west is lined with Norway maples and winged euonymus, giving the impression that one is walking on a long-abandoned drive. Indeed, this was probably a service road, one of many that are now only reminders that an estate once occupied this site. The vegetation here consists mainly of landscaped plants and horticultural varieties—*Deutzia*, *Rhododendron*, *Cryptomeria*, Atlas blue cedar, bush honeysuckle, privet. The original mansion was constructed during Long Island's exclusive "Gold Coast Era" of the early 1900's. The house no longer stands; only the ruins of a few roofed porches and crumbling stairways remain.

Rows of hemlocks that once edged a picturesque vista now lead into the preserve's Upland Woods. This section is the typical climax community on Long Island, with hickory and white, red, and chestnut oak as the major tree species. Before the turn of the century, the American chestnut dominated these woods. The chestnut blight that affected all of the eastern hardwood forests did not kill off the trees' roots. Huge old stumps still continue to send up shoots, but they too will soon die.

Pink is the color of the Upland Woods in April and May. Our native azalea of the Northeast, the pinxter flower, forms the predominant shrub layer, covering the hillsides with pale blossoms on six-foot high bushes. Pink lady's-slippers are not particularly uncommon here; they are one of the main wildflowers of the Upland Woods. On Lady's-slipper Hill, one can look in almost any direction and count over a hundred of these beautiful orchids without even turning around.

The Upland Woods also provide a home for a rich variety of birds. Broad-winged Hawks and Red-bellied Woodpeckers have nested here. In late spring, the Veery's flute-like notes and the Great Crested Flycatcher's *wheep* mingle with the *teacher teacher* of the Ovenbird, and the flash of brilliant red means that a Scarlet Tanager has just swept past.

The trail north of Lady's-slipper Hill leads out of the woods and to the top of High Point, a hill overlooking Persimmon Pond and the Seven Ponds Woods to the west. This pond was named for the ring of persimmon trees, the only ones in the preserve, that surround it.

Here, one may see signs of the many animals that are drawn to a source of drinking water. On the first warm days of March, a woodchuck may appear on top of High Point to survey the territory below. On rare occasions, a red fox may cautiously slip down to the water's edge. As the pond water recedes in mid-summer, the tunnels of the muskrats are left exposed. Now the field by High Point is green with newly emerging vegetation, but it is in the early autumn that an azure sky intensifies the brilliant colors. Virginia creeper starts the show as early as the end of August with fiery crimson leaves and dull blue berries. The glossy leaves of the tupelo are next, turning a deep reddish-purple. Finally, the young dogwoods' maroon foliage set against the background of amber beardgrass, *Andropogon*, blend together like an Impressionist watercolor.

A steep slope leads down from High Point and back through another field to the north. Looking at the ten-foot dogwoods and maples, it is hard to imagine that this field was cut flat only five years ago as part of a management project. An opening in a chain-link fence at the end of the field brings us back to the 50-acre parcel that comprised the original Muttontown Nature Center when it first opened ten years ago. Directly ahead lies the Succession Field, a good example of old, overgrown farmland. The lower half will be maintained as a meadow to insure a wider diversity of wildlife habitats in the preserve.

If nature were left alone to have her way in a field, the result would closely resemble the Pioneer Woods. This second-growth woods is gradually replacing the more sun-tolerant trees such as crabapple, juniper, and birch with the shade-tolerant trees and shrubs of a climax community. A planting of white pines in the center of the Pioneer Woods has reseeded in several spots. One of these was once the best area for roosting owls, until curiosity-seekers and increased usage of the area drove them out.

As the fence line trail leaves the Pioneer Woods, it crosses a ravine that marks the route of old Muttontown Lane. This road, overgrown now with a tangle of briers, was used long ago when sheep were raised on nearby lands for their meat. The Succession Field at this end of the woods trail is rapidly growing up. Wild rose, bittersweet, and catbrier are filling the spaces between fifteen year old apple trees. Drawn to this intermediate edge community are four species of warblers. The Yellow Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, and Blue-winged Warbler are especially numerous during the spring and sum-

mer, often heard if not seen. The Chestnut-sided Warbler, though, always sits high up in a tree, loudly announcing *Pleased pleased pleased to meetcha!*

Warblers—the whole atmosphere of the Wet Woods in spring is summarized in that one word—warblers. From late April onward, anticipation grows with each morning walk. The Black-and-white Warblers come first, triggering the alert. Then the day finally arrives—“They’re here!” and the warblers are everywhere. Even the veteran birder’s head spins, ears straining to recall the twisps not heard since last spring, eyes straining to catch a glimpse of these elusive creatures. Eye-ring? Wing-bars? Streaked? Nothing insures a better case of “warbler neck” than looking for a tiny greenish-yellow bird at the top of a tree with freshly-sprouted greenish-yellow leaves. Often a two-hour walk in May does not even take us past this fifteen-acre woodlot just behind the Nature Center. Then, as suddenly as it began, the warbler invasion ends. Only those species that will nest in the preserve are left behind, as the last of the Blackpolls continue their travels farther north.

This brief walk covered only about 250 acres. Muttontown Park and Preserve includes an additional 270-acre tract that is not yet open to the public. With six major habitats and a location at the edge of the Atlantic flyway, the preserve averages over 170 species of birds each year. The Preserve’s list exceeds 200 species, ranging in scarcity from Red-winged Blackbirds and American Robins to an occasional Summer Tanager or bittern, to the one Turkey Vulture that soars overhead each March. In addition to the work done on natural science research and collections, the preserve also sponsors outdoor education programs and youth group camping with conservation projects.

The Nature Center, located off the corner of Route 25A and Route 106 in East Norwich, Long Island, is open every weekday from 9:30 am to 4:30 pm. The preserve gates are open every day except major holidays. Trail maps, seasonal bird lists, and other information are available at the Nature Center, or by sending a business-size self-addressed stamped envelope to: Muttontown Preserve, Muttontown Lane, East Norwich, N.Y. 11732; phone (516) 922-3123. Muttontown Park and Preserve is part of the Nassau County Museum System, which includes a wide variety of both history and natural history facilities throughout the county.

23 Luther Place, Huntington Station, N.Y. 11746