

New preserve borders Sunkhaze Meadows

BY AISLINN SARNACKI
BDN STAFF

The Nature Conservancy recently purchased more than 12,000 acres of wetlands and woods, linking the Sunkhaze Meadows National Wildlife Refuge in Milford and the state-owned Bradley Public Reserved Unit. This newly conserved land serves as a wildlife corridor, contains an abundance of waterfowl and wading bird habitat and will be open to low-impact public recreation.

“The exciting thing about this particular property is that it’s so close to Bangor, Orono and Old Town and the communities of Bradley and Milford,” Nancy Sferra, director of science and stewardship of The Nature Conservancy in Maine, said. “It’s an area where there’s a fairly decent local population that would come out and enjoy the land.”

The Nature Conservancy purchased a conservation easement on the property from its previous owner, a company called BBC Land LLC, in 2007 with the agreement The Nature Conservancy would purchase the property by 2015, Sferra explained.

The eight-year installment sale closed Oct. 19, with a total acquisition cost of just over \$4 million, according to Timothy Paul, communication and marketing manager for The Nature Conservancy in Maine. The purchase was funded through private foundations and individual gifts, including a gift of \$300,000 from the TD Bank TD Forests program.

“Basically, it will be managed as an old growth forest,” Sferra said. “We aren’t going to do any future timber harvesting on the land.”

The Nature Conservancy is in the middle of creating a management plan for the property, which it is calling the Bradley Sunkhaze Preserve. The 12,710 acre preserve covers parts of Milford, Greenfield Township and the unorganized territory T32 MD.

At a public event celebrating the new preserve on Dec. 12 at the Old Town Public Library, Sferra took note of what local residents said about the property. Many people at the event expressed a desire for public trails to be established, she said, and The Nature Conservancy is on board with that idea.

“What we’d like to do within the next year is build

one relatively long loop hiking trail off County Road in Milford,” Sferra said. “The biggest challenge for us is to find a good location for the trail. It’s really low, wet ground on much of the property. We want to make sure to put the trail in a location where we don’t have to do a whole bunch of maintenance around water management or put in miles and miles of boardwalks.”

“We’ve done some scouting, and next summer we’re hoping to start building the trail,” she added.

In the meantime, people are welcome to park outside the preserve and walk in on old logging roads.

“We currently appreciate people not bringing their dogs,” Paul said. “We’ll be evaluating whether dogs are consistent with the easement as we develop the management plan.”

Hunting, trapping and fishing will continue to be allowed on the property. However, The Nature Conservancy has blocked off several old logging roads that previously were used by sportsmen to access the property by vehicle. Sferra predicts the discontinuation of these roads will especially reduce the amount of trapping conducted on the property.

Snowmobiling also will continue to be permitted on the property but only on designated trails. The local Pine Tree Snowmobile Club has used a trail crossing the property for years, and the club recently finalized an agreement with The Nature Conservancy to continue that use.

“We have a number of preserves where we have a longterm relationship with snowmobile clubs,” Sferra said.

Founded in 1951, The Nature Conservancy is a global nonprofit organization supported by more than 1 million members. To date, the organization has protected more than 119 million acres of land and thousands of miles of rivers worldwide, working in all 50 states and more than 35 countries.

In Maine, The Nature Conservancy has conserved or assisted in the conservation of nearly 1.75 million acres and manages more than 75 preserves, including the Debsconeag Lakes Wilderness Area in Penobscot County, Saco Heath Preserve in Saco, Indian Point Blagden Preserve in Trenton and Crockett Cove Preserve on Deer Isle.

The Nature Conservancy



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Bradley Sunkhaze Preserve.

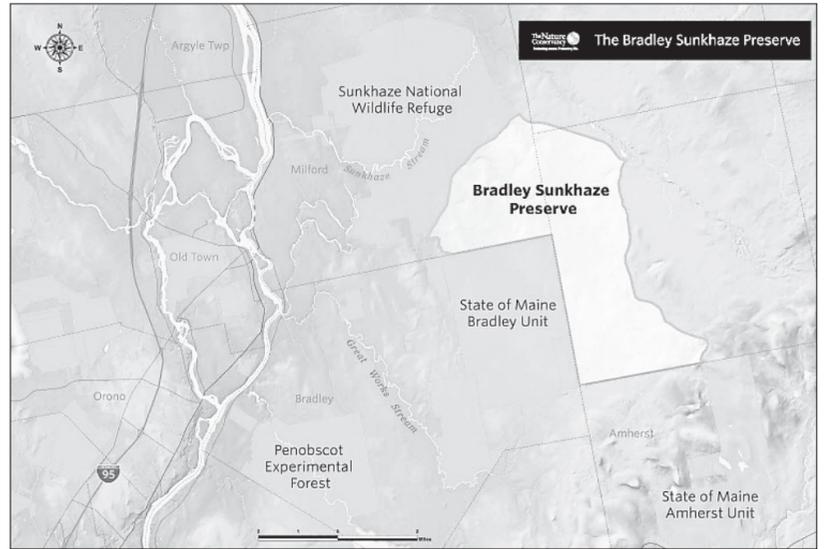
has worked for years to form the Bradley Sunkhaze Preserve for multiple reasons, Sferra said, including the proximity of the land to the growing towns of Bangor and Orono.

“This is one of the areas of the state that has one of the highest residential development rates, so we wanted to have something set aside in an area that could possibly be impacted by future development,” Sferra said.

The Nature Conservancy also saw the value in the preserve acting as a wildlife corridor. It connects the Sunkhaze Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, which is 11,485 acres and contains the state’s second largest domed bog, and the state-owned 9,277 acre Bradley Public Reserved Land. Together, these three properties make up more than 33,000 acres of contiguous conserved property that includes a variety of wetlands, waterways and lowland forests.

In addition the preserve just barely touches the boundary of the state-owned 4,974 acre Amherst Community Public Forest, which contains upland forest and remote ponds.

“The Fish and Wildlife Service is really excited by the possibilities of the landscape level conservation in that area,” said Steve Agius, assistant refuge manager for the Northern Maine National Wildlife Refuge Complex, which includes the Sunk-



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Bradley Sunkhaze Preserve.

haze, Moosehorn and Aroostook National Wildlife Refuges.

Landscape level conservation is a field-based approach to conservation focusing on landscape capable of supporting and maintaining a diversity of plant and animal life. This method of conservation often includes creating wildlife corridors, conserving pieces of land that connects otherwise isolated habitat patches and creating a bridge between wildlife populations.

“It’s a large corridor for wildlife to move about,” Agius said of the new preserve. “It’s a great habitat

for migratory birds, wading birds and waterfowl, species that are dependent on wetlands.”

“The Nature Conservancy and the Fish and Wildlife Service have worked together throughout the country, worked hand in hand over the decades, and this is certainly another great example of the partnership between the two groups,” Agius said.

Agius said the Fish and Wildlife Service plans to help The Nature Conservancy in restoring wildlife habitat on the land, especially in projects that will improve fish passages.

“It’s a pretty wet piece of property,” Agius said. “It’s been cut over pretty heavily in past years. ... There’s a lot of forested lowlands and marshy wetlands.”

The property hasn’t been harvested since The Nature Conservancy purchased a conservation easement on the property in 2007, Sferra said, and the forest is growing back. In a few years, the preserve will look much different than it does today.

To learn more about The Nature Conservancy and their projects in Maine, visit nature.org/maine.

Moss lines a section of the Peter’s Brook Trail in Blue Hill.



Hike

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spot for picnicking and launching kayaks and other small boats. It also serves as the parking area for the Peter’s Brook Trail.

(Blue Hill Heritage Trust spells it “Peter’s Brook Trail” with an apostrophe, though the brook it follows is technically called Peters Brook, without an apostrophe, because it is named after the Peters family.)

Maintained by Blue Hill Heritage Trust, Peter’s Brook Trail crosses privately-owned land that is protected by conservation easements. Public access is made possible through the permission of the landowner, so it’s especially important that visitors stay on the trail, pick up after themselves and respect the natural landscape and wildlife.

Since the trail is fairly wide, it’s easy to follow. The only confusing point is a short distance from the trailhead, when the

trail comes to a “T.” At this intersection, turn left to continue on the trail. If you turn right, you’ll come to someone’s private field and residence.

Following Peters Brook, the trail travels through a forest composed mostly of conifers — spruce, white pine, hemlock, balsam fir and cedar trees — with a few oak trees scattered throughout. Growing under the shade of these trees, an abundance of mosses and hardy low-lying plants carpet the forest floor.

A few informal side trails here and there will bring you down to the edge of the water, where you can view several tiny waterfalls and churning pools.

The trail ends at a waterfall, which is unnamed as far as I know, but is certainly a sight to behold. There, whitewater tumbles down over a steep set of natural rock steps to plunge into a calm shallow pool below.

While using this trail, it’s important to observe a few simple rules. Dogs are

permitted if on leash at all times. Fires, camping and bikes are prohibited.

For information about the trail, including a trail map, visit bluehillheritagetrust.org or call 374-5118.

Personal note: It certainly didn’t seem like mid-December on Saturday when my husband, Derek, and I walked Peter’s Brook Trail with our dog, Oreo. The sun was shining and the temperature hovered in the 40s, rendering our winter hats and mittens unnecessary. Oreo, looking handsome in his new blaze orange Buff bandana, didn’t even need to wear a coat (aside from his permanent coat of short white and black fur, that is).

Honestly, I chose Peter’s Brook Trail because it’s short and near our home; we had a family Christmas shopping trip planned for that afternoon, so we didn’t have much time for outdoor adventuring. Lucky for us, the trail turned out to be much more beautiful than I expected. The evergreen forest was truly “ever green,”



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Trail signs posted by the Blue Hill Heritage Trust direct hikers along the 0.5-mile Peter’s Brook Trail in Blue Hill.

even during this bleak time of year, when most of the world in Maine is composed of grays and browns. Crows raised a racket from the treetops, and red squirrels wandered up to us, chattering loudly and waving their bushy tails.

The nameless waterfall at the end of the trail was much grander than I expected. At its base, I carefully balanced on slick, algae-covered rocks, risking a cold plunge in the shallow water, to photograph it

at different angles. Fortunately, I didn’t slip. Though the weather has been unseasonably warm this December, it’s not quite swimming weather ... though Oreo would beg to differ. He had a nice dip before we walked back to trailhead.

For more of Aislinn Sarnacki’s adventures, visit her blog at accountwithaislinn.bangordailynews.com. Follow her on Twitter: @1minhikegirl.

Holyoke

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6 to 8 p.m. on consecutive Mondays. The cost of the course is \$40, and that includes the use of all equipment and supplies — you can try the activity and see how you like tying before buying equipment of your own. Students under the age of 17 must be accompanied by a parent.

It’s not uncommon for folks to decide to take up fly tying even though they’ve never actually fly fished

If you’re interested, you can learn more by going to penobscotflyfishers.com/fly-tying-classes.htm.

Or, you can register — a cap of 30 students has been set — by calling Rob Dunnett at 907-9008 or emailing him at treasurer@penobscotflyfishers.com.

An interesting fact to consider: It’s not uncommon for folks to decide to take up fly tying even though they’ve never actually fly fished. The activity itself can be relaxing and can provide a creative outlet as the snow piles up during our long Maine winters.

If you are a fly angler, the rewards are even more tangible. The first time you catch a fish on your own creation or hand a fly you tied to an angler who just doesn’t have anything similar in his vest, that time you invested at the tying vise will have paid off, with interest.

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