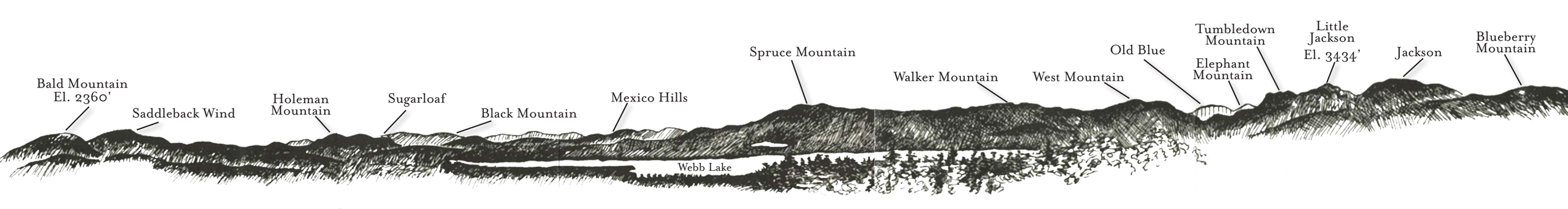


For centuries, visitors to the Weld area have been drawn to Center Hill for its scenic beauty. People today are also drawn by a sense of wilderness expanding as far as the eye can see. But, Mt. Blue State Park and its surroundings bear witness to a longtime human presence that both competes and coexists with nature. To better understand this relationship, study this pamphlet as you walk the half-mile loop trail to the Center Hill ledges, long appreciated for their outstanding views alone. When you are finished, if you don't plan to take the trail guide home, please return it here so that it may be used again.

1 bygone days

From here, where you picked up this guide, and from up at the Adirondack shelter where the trail begins, you can see the heavily forested shoulders of the Tumbledown Mountain Range where the area's first farm was established in the summer of 1798. By then, some parts of Maine had been colonized for nearly two hundred years. The indigenous people of the region - like the first Europeans to visit the area - hunted and trapped this area only seasonally, using the larger lakes, river valleys and coastal areas with their better climate and food resources for more permanent settlement. This was virgin forest then, broken only by trails used by animals and the few people who hunted them.


star flower

By 1870, Weld had reached its peak population (1,130) and the picture was vastly different: only twenty-five percent of the land was wooded, the rest had been cleared (mostly by the cut-and-burn method used widely throughout Maine) for farmland. What we think of today as "wilderness" was tamed and pastoral. Sheep, prize cattle, and acres of wheat covered the landscape. On almost every stream there were shingle, board and clapboard mills. Industries included a tannery, starch factory, carding and woolen mill, boot and shoe factory, butter-tub, cheese and canning factories, potash and boat factories, excelsior and veneer mills, and even a spruce gum merchant.

2 a park develops

At the start of the trail, passing the Adirondack Shelter, think about some of the changes this area faced when the men employed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) were building park facilities like this building in the mid-1930's. The Great Depression had dealt the last blow to farming, which after the first boom was always a struggle on the thin, acid, stony soils covering the hillsides. The farms farthest out of town were long since abandoned and grown over.

Mt. Blue State Park was created in 1935 by land grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, at a time when Weld's population had dropped below 500 and was still declining. Today, the park has 70,000 visitors a year and is a major factor in the area's development as a recreation center. Enlarged several times since the Thirties, at just over 8,000 acres it is now the largest park in the state system.

3 we' re part of the change

While considering the history of forces shaping the land, we might well consider the effects of our own presence. The trail ahead of you on the hillside is a good example of the wear and tear of hundreds of feet passing over the same path. Trail crews have attempted to prevent further erosion by siting water bars to guide run-off and, as budgets permit, gravel will be brought in to replace the eroded forest duff. A bit of ecological trail etiquette: stick to the prepared area, even if it's muddy. Spreading out or creating spur trails only compounds the problem.

4 carved by ice

The view is what you came for, so take some time to enjoy it. It is truly monumental when you consider the forces that shaped it. The bedrock of the region is over 400 million years old, formed of layers of sediment thousands of feet thick left by ancient seas. Over time, these layers were folded and injected with magma (hot molten rock) which changed it into a harder rock, most of which is called gneiss by geologists. Cooling magma flowed through fractures in the layers, causing the streaks of lighter colored rock called granodiorite you find on the ledges here.

But the most dramatic event was the coming of the great glaciers that covered the state and reshaped its character. The valley before you, including the shallow Webb Lake basin, was scoured out as the glacier advanced toward the southeast.

When the glacier melted, other areas were left with deposits of loose materials up to a depth of 100 feet. Even the rock you are standing on shows the power of ice over a mile thick: that sharp-cornered drop-off of about three feet resulted from a part of the rock being "plucked off" and carried away.

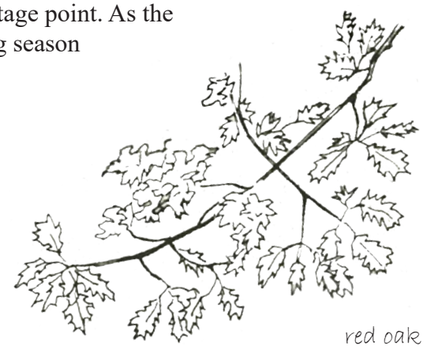
The grooves on the surfaces beneath your feet were scratched by the rough, rock embedded underside of the ice mass. They point in the direction of its movement and have remained a testament to the glacier's passage for 12,000 years.

Webb Lake is fed by seven streams that originate in mountain springs; its waters join the Androscoggin watershed by way of the Webb River which flows out of the south end of the lake. If you are looking for Mt. Blue, it'll be behind you, barely visible through the trees. And that plume of smoke sometimes visible beyond the Mexico hills is a paper mill in Rumford- an essential part of the region's economy, and another reminder that what we preserve of nature is never far separated from the effects of human beings.

5 pause and enjoy

You are now passing through a stand of red oak. While oaks are prevalent in southern Maine, they are not common in Mt. Blue State Park. The sunny south slope, its rocky, well drained and dry soil, and a relative tolerance to shade have enabled the oak to maintain a foothold on Center Hill. Look for its distinctive pointy-lobed leaves and acorns scattered on the ground. The wood of the red oak has many uses, including flooring, furniture, fenceposts, pulpwood, and lobster traps.

In the fall, one of nature's grander displays can be seen from this vantage point. As the trees' growing season winds down and the essential green pigment chlorophyll is used up, secondary pigments of different colors start to show up. Temperature, moisture and the amount and strength of sunlight all affect the magnitude of the fall colorations. Look for the rusty brown of the oaks, the yellow of the birches, poplars and beeches, the crimson red and orange of the maples and the almost purple color of the ash trees.


red oak

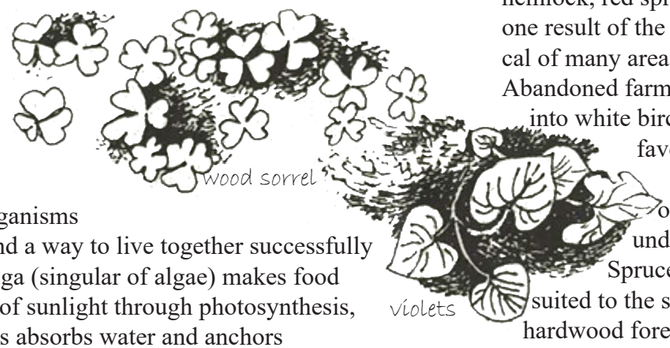
6 a bog lends diversity

The top of Center Hill, elevation 1,640 feet, may seem an odd place to find a bog. But bogs form wherever there is a spot with poor drainage and a sufficient supply of water (rain) to keep it moist throughout the year. Though isolated from more typical lowland wet areas, this small bog contains blue flag iris,sphagnum mosses, sedges, and other plants that thrive in acidic, wet spots. Between the bog and the path are several large flat boulders. If visitors before you have resisted the temptation to sweep them clean, you are likely to see piles of nutshells and pine cone leavings dropped by squirrels who use these elevated platforms as dining tables while keeping a sharp eye out for predators.

bog grass

7 looking at the forest floor

The path curves here and starts to go downhill. In the spring, you can see Canada mayflower (wild or false lily-of-the-valley), white violets, trout lily (yellow dogtooth-violet), wood sorrel, painted trillium, starflower, and currants. At all times of the year, you are likely to see mosses and lichens on the rocks and trees.



wood sorrel

violets

Lichens are really two organisms that have found a way to live together successfully as one. The alga (singular of algae) makes food with the help of sunlight through photosynthesis, and the fungus absorbs water and anchors the organism, as well as consuming the food made by the alga. Most lichens add only 1/10 of an inch a year to their radius, so you can estimate the age of some of those you see. Lichens have long been used as dyes and drugs, but lately they have become even more important as indicator species. Since lichens die when exposed to sulphur dioxide, a poisonous gas with many harmful effects, and absorb metals, scientists can study lichens to measure industrial pollutants and the ways those pollutants affect the environment and human health.

8 Mount Blue

A short turn off the trail here gives you a spectacular view of Mt. Blue. Its unique cone-shaped peak makes it distinctly visible for miles around. The small double-humped mountain to its left is Little Blue. All the land you see in front of you encompasses Mt. Blue State Park. Imagine rolling farmland, stone walls, and country lanes before you. Today a new forest has grown up, slowly erasing the not-too-distant past.

9 blowdowns and winter browse

The trail curves left again and enters a rather messy looking area of woods. The chainsaw cuts on some of the felled trees you see were made by maintenance crews clearing the way for you. Winter winds hit this side of the hill, and these blow-downs are a common result of shallow root systems in thin soil. Young trees have sprouted up in the openings thus created. Because new, tender shoots are favored by deer and moose as winter browse, the tips of these trees may have a blunt, cropped look.

moose browsing in winter

10 forest succession

From the mixed hardwoods we now enter a stand of hemlock, red spruce and balsam fir, all conifers. This is one result of the transitional forest typical of many areas in northern Maine. Abandoned farm fields soon grow up into white birch and poplar trees that favor direct sunlight. Beech, maple, and other trees less tolerant of sun grow underneath in the newly created shade. Spruce, fir and other hardy conifers better suited to the soil and climate gradually displace the hardwood forest. Known as a climax forest, these resulting stands of softwoods will remain relatively stable until conditions are altered by people or nature.

cones

In the fall, most broad-leaved hardwood trees lose their leaves in preparation for the cold winter months. Most conifers have made a different kind of adaptation to freezing temperatures. The needle-like leaves of conifers have a much smaller surface area and most have a hard, waxy or leathery surface. This reduces water loss, and at the same time, frost-proofing adaptations keep the living leaf cells from freezing. Keeping their needles this way year-round makes trees such as spruce, fir and pine “evergreen”.

11 the future forest

Arriving at the cedar trees, you might want to stop a moment at the rocks, look out at the Tumbledown Range again and savor the pleasures of the hike you just took. The hills before you long ago reverted to forest from cleared land. You now know that what you see is not purely “wilderness,” but second and even third growth woods. This is an area that has changed and changed again. Keep in mind as you leave that what you have seen and learned on this walk is just a small part of the complex system that is at work. Whenever we apply our knowledge to nature, we must realize that there is far more that we don’t know than we do know - including the consequences of our actions. Our species is one among many, all interrelated. We depend on the earth and its living, natural systems for everything: for food, material goods, and spiritual renewal. The more we understand and enjoy a beautiful woodland like this one, the more likely we are to use it wisely. But even if we don’t understand it, our lives may depend on its survival.

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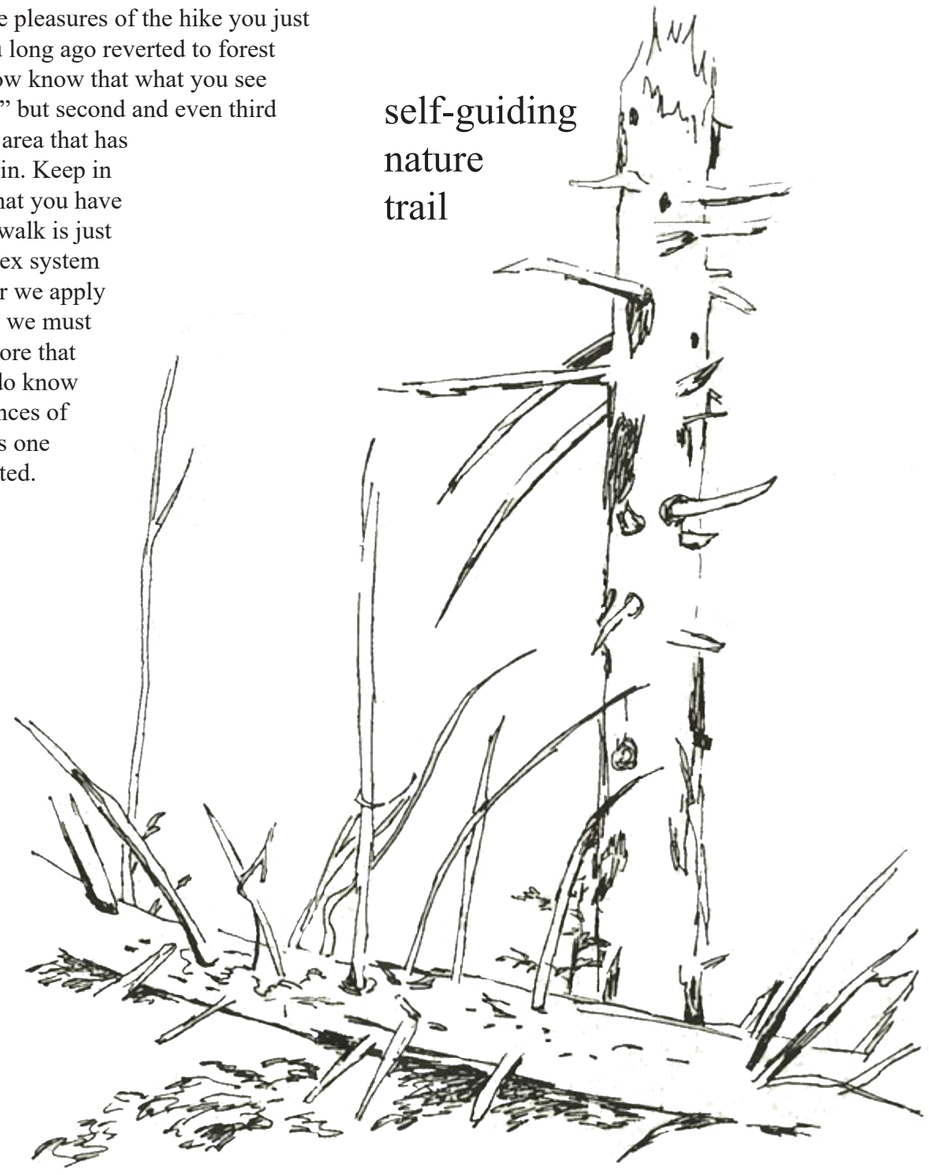
Illustrated by Pamela Prodan.

Center Hill

at Mount Blue State Park

self-guiding nature trail



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