

IN THE SOURLANDS

Hunterdon County Sourland Mountain Preserve

By Laurie Cleveland

Just two miles north of Hopewell Borough on Rileyville Road, there's a peaceful place that's worlds away from the worries of modern life, yet nestled in the very heart of the most densely populated state in the nation: The Hunterdon County Sourland Mountain Preserve.

The park's over 350 acres offer opportunities for picnicking, biking, cross-country skiing, photography, bird watching...or just a lovely, restful place to get away. The trail winds through a beautiful deciduous forest, strewn with large boulders. There are four trails that each offer unique nature opportunities of their own. The Main Service Road Trail is very wide and flat, with a short uphill slope at the end. Slightly more challenging trails branch off from this Main Trail and appeal to more adventurous hikers.

Many rare and endangered birds, resident and migrant, can be found there including Kentucky Warblers, Cooper's hawks, Barred Owls, vireos, and Scarlet Tanager

The Preserve is also home for several endangered plant species and species of special concern: Giant Yellow Hyssop, Slender Toothwort, Wild Comfrey, and Winged Monkey flower.

There are many vernal (temporary) pools, throughout the Preserve, which provide perfect breeding habitat for amphibians. In the spring, frogs and salamanders lay their eggs in these pools to avoid fish predation. By the time these pools dry, the young have usually matured and are no longer fully aquatic. Spotted Salamanders, Wood Frogs, and Gray Tree Frogs are just a few of the amphibians that you may find here.

The Sourland Preserve is a second generation oak forest. The original forest was cut down when the area was an active quarry. Formed almost 200 million years ago, the rocks of the Sourlands, called diabase or "trap rock," were used to produce railroad ballast, concrete aggregate, and Belgian blocks for road beds. When the quarrying stopped, the area was reclaimed by nature. Explorers can still find cleft boulders and further evidence of these old quarries.

This past weekend, Hopewell Valley residents participated in a scavenger hunt in the Preserve. The hunt was sponsored by the Sourland Conservancy, and held in conjunction with the Hopewell Valley Municipal Alliance event, "Hopewell Valley Come Outside and Play!" Individuals and families followed clues that led them down the Main Trail searching for natural treasures such as cleft boulders, mayapples, a

pileated woodpecker hole, and wild grapevines. They learned about the items they found, checked off their sheets, and received prizes from the Conservancy.

The scavenger hunt and photo clues are now available on the Sourland Conservancy's website, sourland.org. Most of the items may be found in the spring through the fall. Please contact hikes@sourland.org for more information.

If you haven't had a chance to experience this local gem, don't let another weekend pass you by!



Sourland Scavenger Hunt clue: Hugging Trees. Sometimes two different trees grow together. These may be of the same species or even trees of two different families. In this case, a beech and maple grew together. Notice the smooth, gray bark of the beech and the much rougher maple (pictured here with Scarlet Tanager)