

SOURLANDS HIKE – Non-Technology Walk



The Smiling Rock, Sourlands Trail off Greenwood Avenue, Hopewell

Every once in a while, I give myself the mandate to walk a trail without technology.

This is an interesting challenge, even though I NEVER use a cell phone on a trail!

Today's Sourlands Technology-less mandate extends to my other addictions — the camera and my binoculars. I found it really hard to leave them behind. As in 'at home', so I was not tempted to weaken at the last minute.

The images here were taken, I think in the 20th Century, I include these two scenes to give you the flavor of the Sourlands Preserve experience. This post relies on words, not photographs.

Intriguing question — am I addicted to my camera and my optics? I did feel, initially, quite naked without them. Almost instantly, however, I became aware of heightened senses, as though my entire being were a sounding board, an enormous lens, a fragrance-detector. Without peering through anything, focusing anything, I had become a force field of antennae. Everything was grist to my mill.

Anyone who hikes in the Sourland Mountains knows that there are boulders everywhere. I was 1000 x more aware of these 'diagnostic' basalt beings, than through lenses! Some do have almost human, and some powerful reptilian fissures. But my reaction today went far beyond resemblances.

The aura of Sourlands rocks speaks, in oracular tones, when one is opened by the absence of technology to the gestalt of the walk.

Dappled light. Threatening skies. Instant solitude, silence, refuge indeed!

The beechwood forest has just leafed out. There is no light to equal that flickering through new beech leaves, as NJWILDBEAUTY readers know from the first Berkshire images from last week. The forest floor is as awash as it will be in autumn, only with pink-brown-to-pale beech leaves, just relinquished. This process, which brings acid nourishment to the beeches to ensure the nut harvest, usually occurs in mid-April. It's almost the end of May.

Ovenbirds overhead fill the forest with eee-errr, eee-errr, eee-errr! My theory is that they're high in the trees to draw predator attention far from their forest-floor, oven-shaped nests.

The long long trail is lined at the outset with airy pale magenta wild phlox, flat blossoms on frail stems. Each burst is harshly tugged by surprisingly strong windbursts for May.

The path is far gentler than I remember. Softer, and more rarely interlaced with roots or studded with rocks. This response on my part could just be the difference between walking the Sourland Mountains and hiking last week's Berkshire and Green mountain trails.

Perhaps the deer management of the Sourlands is beginning to work — a result devoutly desired by all who cherish birds and flowers. Our deer infestation has removed the forest understory throughout this wild region. These powerful basalt boulders protected this region from most farming and most developing, but cannot fend off deer.

Only deer management, yes, HUNTING, can do this. It is essential. Deer herds devour native plants that evolved with our birds and pollinators. This gives carte blanche to the invasives, which have no insect holes in them, because they feed no insects. Therefore, breeding birds and seeking pollinators cannot find the essentials with which they have evolved over centuries. "NO INSECTS — NO BIRDS" — It's as simple as that, as Sharyn McGee, President of Washington Crossing Audubon, taught us in Jared Fleshers prize-winning, straight-talking, beautiful and even powerful Sourlands Film.

True Solomon's seal emerges alongside the trail, 'ringing' its tiny pale bells. Later on, in a different configuration of forest, I'll find false Solomon's seal, its finial creamy bloom like a puff of smoke.

Big healthy clumps of violet leaves, —like nosegays prepared by My Fair Lady, only lacking the purple blossoms—, hearten me as I climb.

Small ordinary yellow blossoms appear. Later, in deeper woods, near a stream, I will find rarer ones. Both are the hue and glossiness of buttercups. The ordinary one has five round petals and fat leaves like geraniums. The extraordinary one has six leaves, pointed like daisies. It's very tiny, its tall pointy leaves like grass someone forgot to mow.

I pass several stretches of wetlands on the main trail, normally echoing with frog chorus. If I hear a single frog today, it's more of a cough than a croak. The so-called wetlands resemble messy deserts.

High on the left, a phoebe calls out its name with a certain pitifulness, though it IS territorializing, and will be in the same place exactly on my way back.

There should be wood thrushes in forest this deep. Deer destroying understory removes safe sites for their lives, as well as for ovenbirds. Ovenbird nests may be a bit safer, because often tucked into strong tree roots.

Dark Christmas ferns are tall and strong in shady stretches; hay-scented fern delicate, airy and much less vivid green, in splashes of sunlight.

Here and there on the path are tulip tree ‘tulip’ flowers, all bright orange (brighter than Princeton) and wild chartreuse. Indians used these very straight sun-seeking trees to make dug-out canoes, there being a decided dearth of birches hereabouts. If you need birches, as Frost did, as I do, try Berkshires or Northern Michigan.

Probable rose-breasted grosbeak overhead in this stretch — identified by mellifluousness.

Silent robins on the trail.

Duelling pileated woodpeckers call attention to their ownership of territory on either side of the path.

The mutter or purr of red-bellied woodpecker, suffuses another part of the forest.

This is a place so dense that I am glad of every bit of teaching to bird by ear, by naturalists and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and long-ago tapes..

