

IN THE SOURLANDS

Baldpate Mountain

By Caroline Katmann

Baldpate Mountain, located in the Sourland region, is one of the most important forest areas in central New Jersey. To fully appreciate this state treasure, however, a clarification of terms would be helpful.

A number of terms are often used interchangeably to describe a variety of geographical areas in the Sourland region. "The Sourland ridge" refers to the diabase formation that forms the hard rock core of Sourland Mountain itself. "The Sourland Mountain region" (or "Sourland region") refers to the entire 90 square mile region, which includes diabase ridges, forests, wetlands, grasslands, ground water, surface water and developed and preserved land parcels. The Sourland Mountain region consists of four main topographic features – Sourland Mountain, Baldpate Mountain, Pennington Mountain and Pheasant Hill (see photo).

The focus of this article is the beautiful and biologically diverse Baldpate Mountain, in the southwestern part of the Sourland region. Underlain with the same diabase formation as Sourland Mountain, Baldpate Mountain boasts the Ted Stiles Preserve - Hopewell Township's largest contiguous forest (over 1400 acres), home to an abundance of native plant communities and wildlife. Interior forest nesting birds, such as Kentucky warblers, scarlet tanagers and ovenbirds can be heard here during breeding season. Over ten miles of hiking trails lead hikers through mature forest and open meadows.

Baldpate also harbors 22 rare plants, including six state endangered species. The state endangered Redbud is commonly used in landscaping, but natural populations only grow on diabase bedrock. A visit to Baldpate in early spring for the beautiful sight of Redbud trees in bloom is highly recommended! In addition to the rare plants, Baldpate is home for 52 additional plants considered "conservative," meaning they have very narrow habitat requirements, including Showy Orchis, Fringed Gentian, Green Milkweed and Whorled Milkweed.

Patricia Sziber, Executive Director of Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space (a partner with Mercer County in managing the Ted Stiles Preserve on Baldpate Mountain) explains, "Baldpate is a mecca for nature observation and has the largest concentration of migratory songbirds in Mercer County, including some that are listed as Species of Concern. Because of its high numbers of birds Baldpate has been designated an Important Bird Area. It is also a great place to see and photograph plant life, including some less common plants. A recent survey logged over 100 species of fungi!"

Good stewardship practices are alive and well on Baldpate! Michael Van Clef, Stewardship Director at Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space, explains, "Meadow restoration of seven acres turned weeds into productive pollinator habitat and restoration of eight acres of abandoned agricultural land plugged a hole in the existing forest areas. We are in the process of working with Mercer County and NJ Audubon to create a Forest Stewardship Plan that we hope can serve as a model for New Jersey!"

A walk to the summit of Baldpate, the highest point in Mercer County, offers a spectacular view of the Delaware River and, on a clear day, you can see the tops of a few of the tallest buildings in Philadelphia.

To the horror of the environmental community, residents near Baldpate, and visitors to this sensitive and valuable natural resource, the PennEast Pipeline Company is proposing to lay a 36" natural gas pipeline through sensitive and critical habitat on Baldpate Mountain.

PennEast claims that it will "co-locate" its pipeline along the JCP&L Right of Way (ROW) that already bisects Baldpate's forest with a 180' wide ROW. In reality, PennEast would cut another, nearly adjacent, 75-125' wide and 2.84 mile long ROW on JCP&L's south side, closer to the forest core, razing approximately 28 acres of forest in the process.

"The combined JCP&L and PennEast ROWs would leave a wider 267'-410' swath marching up the mountain, further separating two forest mountain halves. The 300' deep deleterious 'edge effect' would not just affect Baldpate's summit but reach down into its southern flanks." (Fairfax Hutter, Washington Crossing Audubon Society).

Many are concerned about how PennEast would ascend this steep diabase ridge and about the extensive blasting that will surely be required. The creation of access roads and huge staging areas would further intrude into Baldpate's forested core.

"A lot of people think, 'Oh, the birds are in decline because those nasty people in the tropics are cutting down the tropical rain forest.' Well, most of the birds that are around here live in the tropical rain forest in winter but they come up here because food is abundant and it's a good place to raise your family. And, if we don't provide that for them, it has the same effect as it would if you were cutting down the rain forest in the tropics." (Jim Amon in the film, "The Sourlands: A New Jersey Treasure")

"With breeding territories already saturated, wildlife would have nowhere to go. This 267.5' to (potentially) 400' wide, 2.84 mile long swath of devastation could spell the death knell to one of New Jersey's most vital migratory bird stopover and breeding sites, not to mention its uncommonly rich flora, fauna, history, and treasured recreational opportunities." (Fairfax Hutter)

About Baldpate's history, Bob Kappenhaver writes on the website, *Skylands Visitor*, "The origin of Bald Pate's name is one of the park's mysteries. Until the mid-20th century, the mountain was known locally as Kuser Mountain, named for the family who owned it for many decades. In Henry C. Beck's 1939 book, *Fare to Midlands*, reference is made to the top of the mountain having been cleared by one of the Kusers, perhaps for a landing strip. Possibly the bare mountaintop suggested the more recent name of Bald Pate. At the summit, the Kuser estate, called 'Strawberry Hill', included a main house, lodge, and various outbuildings. For a few years in the early 1900s the family established a game farm on the mountain, raising pheasants with the assistance of an experienced gamekeeper and other local workers. In 1986 the family sold the property to Trap Rock Industries (TPI), and in 1998 Bald Pate Mountain was acquired from TPI by Mercer County."

This is a beautiful time of year to visit Baldpate Mountain. I hope you will.

For more information about Baldpate Mountain and the Ted Stiles Preserve, visit www.fohvos.org, and www.washingtoncrossingaudubon.org.

For Sourland region trail maps, including the Ted Stiles Preserve, visit www.sourland.org/sourland-trails-maps/

For detailed information about the proposed route of the PennEast Pipeline and other pipeline information, visit www.thecostofthepipeline.com.

For updates related to the pipeline and other Sourland Conservancy news and events, sign up to receive the Conservancy's eNewsletter at www.sourland.org.

Caroline Katmann is the Executive Director of the Sourland Conservancy. The Conservancy's mission is to protect, promote and preserve the unique character of the Sourland Mountain region.