

Conservation Conversations: Town Forest

Fine day for a walk in the woods. Sunny, steel blue sky, a perfect crisp temperature. Grabbed my walking stick and the dog and made off for the Town Forest trails off Morton Road. We hadn't been there in years.

As we parked in the pull off area by the gate we were met by a few substantial piles of brush "obviously dumped by someone who didn't want it on *their* land," - I humphed. The dog jumped out, tail wagging of course, and just as I turned my eyes from the brush piles..... "holy cow!" I exclaimed. Someone had been seriously re-grading the area for what appeared to be dirt bike or mountain bike jumps! - I have to admit, even in my 'old' age, it looked like fun. But on the other hand - the Town Forest is public conservation land set aside for *passive* recreation and protection of our drinking water supply. Alteration to the ground like that removed all of the important ecological layers of leaves and topsoil which aid in filtering out pollutants from rain before they reach our drinking water below, not to mention the habitat for smaller creatures like salamanders, insects and burrowing critters. "The Town Forest just isn't the place for this," I told the dog.

Dog ran up ahead on her long tether as I tried to avoid the excavation and not to turn an ankle on the uneven terrain. A little further and "Ah, this is what I remembered about this land," - a quiet little unnamed coastal plain pond to my left. I spied a pair of ducks. "Darn, forgot the binoculars! They're not mallards, but....come here pup, let's sit here. Be still." After the ducks moved out of sight I began to lecture the dog on the ecological importance of coastal plain ponds and how they are globally threatened - "there just aren't many of these unique small ponds left with natural shorelines due to development and human impact to the shorelines." She seemed to agree.

I went on, "These ponds provide the only habitat for certain rare plant species such as the Plymouth Gentian which is found along the sandy shorelines. It's this sweet fragile pink flower seen in the summer months. It is able to survive in the low nutrient acidic pondshore despite the fluctuating water level. Coastal plain ponds are imperiled due to shoreline development, excessive weed growth from too many nutrients from septic systems and fertilizers, and soil disturbance from heavy recreational use - bikes, horses, even foot traffic can damage the shoreline and the delicate plants."

"Pup, that's why it's so important to protect what remains of undisturbed land.... for the ducks (whatever they were), for the rare species, for our drinking water, and of course, our own enjoyment of the nature." We headed back along a different trail, noting the boundary marker between Harwich & Chatham. "That's right," I remembered, "the protection of this forestland is of interest to both towns - not just Chatham and for sure those squirrels know no boundaries." Oh, I said that "sq" word! And with that dog lurched to the length of her lead into the leaves. "Come on dog, no squirrel chasing today. Let them enjoy the peaceful surroundings." Nice thing about a conversation with a canine - no talking back, no complaining. Just a cock of the head and wag of the tail.

For more information on Coastal Plain Ponds:

http://www.whrc.org/capecod/critical_habitats/Coastal_Plain_Ponds.htm

Provided by the Chatham Conservation Commission.