Saugatuck Falls Natural Area

OWNERSHIP: Town of Redding
ACREAGE: 312.4
ENTRANCES: Route 53, opposite John Read Middle School
PARKING: At the school parking lot
TRAILS:
  White blazes:
  Knapp Way, 1 mile Hemlock, 0.2
  Falls, 0.83 mile Burn, 0.53
  Blue blazes:
  Old Field, 0.67 The Cutoff, 0.2
  Oak, 0.4 Wall, 0.25
  Hardwood, 1.3 Power line: 0.56
  Total all trails: 5.74

BACKGROUND: Probably no scenic spot in Redding is so widely known as Falls Hole, the huge woodland pool in the Saugatuck River with the overhanging cliff on one side and hemlock woods on the other. This is the heart of the Saugatuck Falls area. Generations of young people once came from miles around to plunge into its cool depths, sun themselves on the high rock, and wander in the surrounding woods. Swimming, however, is not permitted in the great pool, which drains into Bridgeport's water supply.

The Saugatuck Falls area was the Town's second, and remains the largest, purchase of open space. In March of 1968, with the aid of federal and state funds, the Town bought the property, which otherwise would have been sold for development, at a net cost to Redding taxpayers of $82,037, or $263 an acre. The vote to buy the property with or without government aid had been virtually unanimous at a Town meeting the previous October.

KEY FEATURES: A network of trails reveals the beauty and diversity of the area. Included in the network are two horseback trails—Knapp Way, and Burn Trail via The Cutoff.

Knapp Way, 150 years ago, was the Johnathan Knapp Highway, a thoroughfare running from Diamond Hill to what is now Route 53. It crossed the Saugatuck River over a bridge, of which partial stone abutments still remain.

Entering opposite John Read Middle School and crossing the footbridge over the Saugatuck, walkers may turn left onto Old Field Trail and stroll beside the river. Look for a white oak, 12'10" in circumference, and a shagbark hickory eight feet around (very large for the species). The soil on this floodplain is said to be 40 feet deep. In early May, marsh marigold, rue anemone and red trillium are abundant along the trail. Just off the trail, on private property, a “kettle” (glacier-made pond without inlet or outlet) may be observed.

Turning off lower Falls Trail onto Hemlock Trail, you are in fragrant evergreen woods with the music of a sparkling brook to accompany you. There are magnificent rock formations and cliffs on upper Falls Trail, which is perhaps best reached via Knapp Way and Oak Trail and then traversed from north to south. Falls Trail leads to Saugatuck Falls (a bit off trail to the east) and, below them, Falls Hole. Both are sights to see. In June, deep pink, shell pink and white laurel under the power line are worth a special trip.

For more difficult but also rewarding hiking, try the Burn and Hardwood Trails, beginning near the Diamond Hill entrance. The former traverses the scene of a forest fire in the mid-1970's, offering an interesting study in the ecological recovery of a burned area. A steep ascent above a deep ravine leads to the Hardwood Trail, which passes through thick laurel stands and along the base of splendid cliffs, then descends over a rocky path to the river.

All told, a place to come back to again and again, exploring all trails in all seasons, and making your own discoveries.

Oldfields vs. Forest Succession

Sustained within Saugatuck Falls Natural Area are several examples of an ecological anachronism—open places formally known as “post-agricultural oldfields,” relics from an earlier time when most of Redding was farmland. As the early farms were abandoned or acquired by non-farming folks, old fields and pastures slowly reverted to woodland through the process of natural succession.

Here, along the Old Field and lower Falls trails, one can see some of these venerable openings in the woods, dotted here and there with eastern red cedar (in this part of the world, one of the first tree species to lead the woodland's attack on open turf). Left to its own devices, nature in time would reinforce red cedar with such other pioneers as poplar, sumac and gray dogwood; and by and by, give or take a half-century, the fields would be looking pre-colonial rather than post-agricultural, with oak and maple and hickory lording it over all.

Thus, in order to “freeze” these fields at a red cedar-stage of succession, to provide some small measure of historical perspective on “lost” landscapes and to enhance the opportunity for biological as well as visual diversity in our open spaces, it has been the policy of the Conservation Commission (and of the Land Trust elsewhere) to mow these fields periodically, lest succession convert them over time into forest, of which this natural area is in no short supply.

In 2001, the Conservation Commission, with funds from a grant, reclaimed about three acres at the start of the Saugatuck Falls Trail from second growth trees and opened the landscape up for the enjoyment of hikers—and the benefit of various birds and beasts. An additional two acres were so reclaimed along the Old Field Trail.