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# INTO BRUSHY MOUNTAIN'S WILDS

## A New Year's hike through newly preserved Leverett forest

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ON BRUSHY MT., LEVERETT

Three centuries ago, settlers dug and laid stones here for homesteads and boundary fences, as forest birds flitted and moose and bobcats kept their distance.

Time took those roofs and walls, leaving this forest to carry on.

Though human activity today surrounds Brushy Mountain, up on its broad slopes, in its wetlands and birch groves, it remains nearly as wild today as in the 18th century.

An historic route in toward the mountain and those old colonial settlements swings south off Rattlesnake Gutter Road — and that's the path I took in Sunday.

A lot of public and private money — \$8.8 million — changed hands Dec. 23 to ensure that most of Brushy Mountain will remain undeveloped. With the state's largest conservation restriction on private land now in place, the roughly 5 square miles that comprise the Paul C. Jones Working Forest will forever connect visitors to a Massachusetts when sprawl wasn't a dirty word. Because this forest does go on and on.

In four hours Sunday, I made my way through this place. I started by hiking up the nearby Rattlesnake Gutter and admiring the dramatic gorge carved by glacial action 12,000 years ago.



LARRY PARNASS

These boundary markers can be seen from Rattlesnake Gutter Road in Leverett, one edge of the big W.D. Cows Co. property.

Then I trekked south into the W.D. Cows forest, along a discontinued portion of the Metacomb and Monadnock Trail, climbing and descending through stands of towering spruce. Later, after wandering ribbons of old logging roads, a section of a snowmobile trail and taking a few side trips, I tested my luck. Compass in hand, I bushwhacked a northwesterly

route to the foot of Rattlesnake Gutter.

Here, in a final drop, I observed signs in the land of that long-ago glacial scrape. Lines on the topographical map come close together because of that elevation change, resembling the logging roads that cut light lines onto the densely wooded slope. I made it out with a few minutes of daylight to spare.

### A forest spine

Though acres on the east side of the forest are being temporarily disturbed by logging, back on the high north-south spine of this tract, which tops out at about 1,200 feet above sea level, the notion of "working" seemed remote.

Up here, in the rough middle of the 3,486 acres that W.D. Cows Co. agreed to protect, it's hard to picture development ever getting here.

This land has been managed by Cows as a productive forest for more than 125 years, after the family-run company's forebears assembled it bit by bit through small land buys.

But land conservation looks at long-term change. Cows' managers said no over the years to plenty of people who sought to buy property here.

It is easy to see why they wanted it. A large-scale



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This waterfall is located about a mile south of the W.D. Cows Co. property line on Rattlesnake Gutter Road in Leverett and a mile east of Montague Road.

real estate venture able to justify infrastructure investments in a densely populated state would like the views, the relatively dry and high but level land and the closeness of Amherst and the University of Massachusetts to the southwest.

But as we now know, the public won, thanks to a big group of federal, state and private investors in a transaction shaped over several years by the Kestrel and Franklin land trusts. It normally takes decades to protect as much land as occurred all at once Dec. 23 at the deeds registry in Greenfield.

That means people like me, and Joanne Muly of Leverett, can continue to hike in here until our legs give out.

I met Muly a mile or so in from the north end of the tract. She'd been walking for three hours,



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A mild first day of 2012 still found pockets of ice along trails in the Brushy Mountain area in Leverett.

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## Hike

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partly on a power line cut to the east of where we stopped to chat. Four dogs kept her company.

Muly was wearing a red-orange jacket for visibility at the tail end of deer-hunting season. "There are some wonderful trails — and we can just go forever," she said, then added mischievously, "I hope nobody finds them."

Trails aren't hard to find here. Knowing where they go is a problem at first. Interestingly, the fine print on the land conservation deal says no one can print and distribute maps without Cows' permission.

It's smart to carry a topographical map, most of which will show the old M&M trail section, along with the streams that can make good routes, depending on underbrush. Though old trail markers for the M&M have been taken down, the trees that bore them will show the squares they occupied for years to come.



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**Sue Katz of Amherst set off Sunday on a 3-to-4-mile hike along back roads and trails through Brushy Mountain armed with a compass and whistle.**

Michael and Sue Katz of Amherst hiked in Sunday with friends from out of town. Markings on Sue Katz's map showed their plan to come in from the south on Number Six Road, off Shutesbury Road, and approach the mountaintop from the east. They ran into thick mountain laurel but as far as I could tell, when we stopped to visit about two miles from where they'd stashed a car, were undeterred.

Michael Katz said he was pleased to see this mountain saved from development, but wishes it could also be saved from logging practices he witnessed that appear to result in discarding tree tops. Sue Katz added that it might not be right to restrict how the land's owners can work it. The deal does require that Cows follow guidelines of a state-approved Forest Stewardship Plan.

For the Katzes, hiking Brushy Mountain is a natural extension of the bicycling and cross-country skiing they do in the area.

### Sights, sounds

A trip through this forest is entirely what you make of it. I listened for birds and caught the chatter of chickadees and the drumming of a downy woodpecker. Above, a pilot was trying stunts. As dusk came on, a train conductor blew his whistle at a grade crossing a few miles off to the southeast.

No more will hikers hear the roar of ATVs, at least not from nearby. The deal prohibits them, but allows snowmobiles on certain routes.

It is quiet enough most moments to feel just feet away from the hush of wind moving through the canopy's spruce needles. And with deciduous leaves down, softening our footsteps, hikers can easily detect, from a distance, the rush of water in this forest's many brooks.

Even at midday, it is dark here on a strangely mild winter afternoon, the first of a new year. The sun rides the southern horizon, barely two palm widths high.

Hikers come upon things by surprise here: a deer hunter's tree stand, a gorgeous waterfall, little rock caves marbled green with moss and dripping water and, everywhere, evidence that the animals that occupy these acres are looking for sustenance.

Scratching in the leaf litter. Scat. Nibbled branches (porcupines?) and massively clawed, tree trunks (yes, black bears). Clusters of tiny cones from a conifer.

The conservation restriction assures that these natural ways will continue, particularly for species that need space to survive, like moose, black bear and bobcat, all of which exist here. The forest sits near hundreds of other acres of preserved land, creating a badly needed home range for these animals, which need lots of elbow room to forage and breed.

It does the same for birds that depend upon a large, intact forest, including the scarlet tanager and Canada and blackburnian warblers.



LARRY PARNASS

**On long hikes, Joanne Muly of Leverett sometimes keeps track of her whereabouts on Brushy Mountain by recalling numbers assigned to the towers along a power line.**

Brushy Mountain has a top, but it doesn't provide a vista. The center of the forest sits on a wide saddle of land nearly a mile across ranging from 800 to 1,000 feet of elevation. It flows around little knolls and backs down into wetlands, the vegetation adjusting to microclimates.

Water, that vital source of life, is everywhere. According to one survey, 60 percent of the area sits within 500 feet of a pond, river, stream or wetland.

As Kristin DeBoer, the Kestrel Land Trust's executive director, put it to me: "Don't look for a peak with a great lookout ... because you won't find one. This is a gently sloping woodland more attractive to wildlife than to view-seeking hikers."

"Walk as a bear would, slowly from tree to tree," she said.

As we do that here, the trees, every forest's rank-and-

file soldiers, come into view in new ways.

For such a long time, this tree in front of me worked, unseen, to become what it is. And then those trees never taken to market pass a long, long time in the process of unbecoming, shedding their limbs and bark, releasing their long-sequestered carbon, hosting animals and eventually falling all the way back to Earth.

As I left the Paul C. Jones Working Forest late Sunday afternoon, I walked through squads of mountain laurel that sit like ruffles on this tract's aprons. I grabbed tree trunks with one hand and then the other as I descended steep slopes near the Gutter, embracing each briefly like handclaps at a contradance. I followed an empty stream bed that sits ready to channel spring rains and snowmelt.

I stepped over battlements of stone walls of all lengths and conditions that remind us of the hard work that went on here. It's numbing physical work few of us can fathom any longer, but we will always be able to know, if we care, where it took place.

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**A view along the WD. Cows Co. property that has been preserved from development. The land includes a discontinued portion of the Metacomet and Monadnock Trail.**

## If you go

To get a look at the northern boundary of the Paul C. Jones Working Forest in Leverett and Shutesbury, walk the non-motorized section of Rattlesnake Gutter Road.

At the northeast end of Rattlesnake Gutter Road, an old logging road runs south into the main body of the 3,486-acre tract. There are signs at the start about the route, a discontinued 3.1-mile section of the Metacomet and Monadnock Trail. It leads down into the heart of the parcel.

Another route in, says Kristin DeBoer of the Kestrel Land Trust, is to start on Number Six Road off Shutesbury Road, at a

gravel pit that is not part of the conservation restriction, and head north.

"The best way to explore Brushy Mountain is on foot," she said. "Plan a long day hike to traverse the mountain and to experience the vastness of the roadless area that has been conserved."

Jeff Lacy of Shutesbury, who hikes the area, suggests parking at a trailhead off Montague Road in Shutesbury a few hundred yards south of the intersection with Carver Road.

He suggests taking the main trail in for a mile or more, bearing right at several intersections. The trail is uphill

and can be strenuous.

The precise route is up to each hiker, but this access does enable hikers to get to the top of Brushy Mountain, which stands at about 1,200 feet of elevation.

Everyone going in should be mindful of weather conditions and the amount of daylight, and carry maps, a compass, water and other provisions to ensure their safety if they have to spend more time in the woods than they anticipated.

The terms of the conservation restriction allow public access to the land from one hour before daylight to one hour after sunset.

— LARRY PARNASS