A New Year’s hike through newly preserved Leverett forest

By LARRY PARNASS
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Three centuries ago, settlers dug and laid stones here for homestead 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 society today surrounds Brushy Mountain, up on its broad slopes, in its wetlands and birch groves, it remains nearly as wild today as it was in the 18th century.

An historic route in toward the mountain and its red colonial settlement swings south off Rattlesnake Gutter Road — and that’s the path I took on Sunday.

A lot of public and private money — $6 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.

Then I trekked south into the W.D. Cowls forest, along a drained, tidewater portion of the Metacomet and Monadnock trails, 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 made it back. 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 3,488 acres that W.D. Cowls Co. agreed to protect, it’s hard to picture development ever getting here.

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

Real estate ventures able to justify infrastructure investments in a density-populated state would like this views, 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 Keelrad and Franklin land trusts. It normally takes decades to protect as much land as occurred all at once Dec. 23 at the state’s registry in Greenfield.

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

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

This waterfall is located about a mile south of the W.D. Cowls Co. property line on Rattlesnake Gutter Road in Leverett and a mile east of Montague Road.
partly on a power line cut to the east of where we stopped to eat. Four dogs kept her company.

Molly 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 Cowsill permission.

It's smart to carry a topo-size map, which will show the 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.

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

It is quiet enough now to feel just feet away from the hush of wind rustling through the canopy's fine needles. And with decision leaves down, reflecting our footsteps, hikers can easily detect, from a distance, the rush of water in this forest's many brooks.

Though midday it is dark here on a strangely mild afternoon, the first of a new year. The sun rises the southern horizon, barely two pats width high.

Hikers come upon things by surprise here: a deer hunter's tree stand, a gorgeous water fall, little rock caves, startling 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: Soot. Mangled branches (portia­ nips) and massively clawed tree trunks (yes, black bears). Clusters of tosm come from a centipede.

The conservation restriction assures that these natural ways will continue, particularly for species that need space to wander, like weasel, black bear and bobcat, all of which exist here. The forest sits near hundreds of other acres of preserved land, creating a buddy 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 Black-throated warblers. No more will hikers hear the roar of ATVs, at least not from nearby. The deal prohibits them, but allows movement on certain routes.

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On long hikes, Joanne Mulvihill 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 500 to 1,000 feet of elevation. It flows around little valleys and back down into wetlands, the vegetation adjusting to micro­ climates.

Water, that vital source of life, is everywhere. According to one survey, 60 percent of the area sits within 10 feet of a pond, river, stream or wetland. As Kevin 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 rock and...