

# THE GREAT OUTDOORS



*A large depression along side a huge willow oak is a vernal pool, which holds water in the springtime, but was dry due to drought in December when this photo was taken. Photo Author.*

## **Let's Take a Hike**

*It's a great time of year to enjoy the outdoors and Mauricetown Preserve is a good place to start.*

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

Each year on the cusp of winter I share with our CU Maurice River members adventures they might pursue during the colder months and beyond. This year I introduced a number of lesser-known trails in the South Jersey region during our fundraiser challenge.

Top on the list of hiking annoyances are hot, humid days, ticks, chiggers, mosquitos, gnats, and other insects. So fall, winter, and spring are delightful times to check out local trails and take precautions to avoid what might bug you. In addition, our winters are often

less brutal than in more northern regions, and even cold months are blessed with mild sunny days that are perfect for spending time outdoors.

Over the coming weeks, mixed in with other nature stories, I shall introduce you to some fun and easy hiking opportunities.

One non-profit organization that has a number of properties in the Southern New Jersey Delaware Bayshore region is *Natural Lands* (formerly called Natural Lands Trust). *Natural Lands* seeks to connect people with nature by preserving open spaces. They try to protect parcels with habitat for native plants and animals that is or, has the potential to become an abundant natural community.

Today biologists seek to create wildlife corridors by linking protected spaces for animals to move among habitat types. Nearly all species make use of multiple environments, at various stages of their life or seasonally. Many animals are obligate users of a particular habitat but few use only one type. Corridors help to make passage between such habitats safer by limiting road crossings. This has benefits for both people and animals; fewer road hazards mean fewer accidents. Additionally, more corridors mean more wild places for animals and more wildlife watching opportunities for people. As a result, over the years many of *Natural Lands* purchases were acquired to connect already protected spaces.

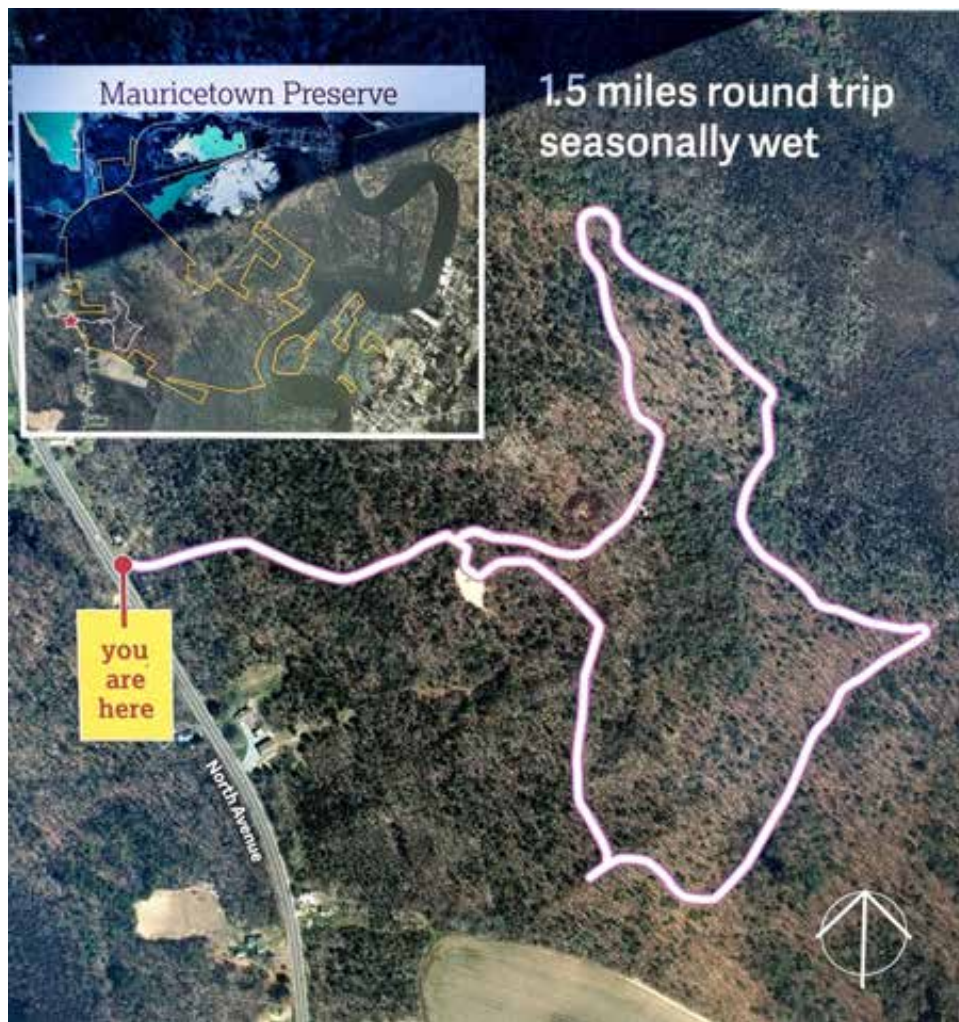
Natural Lands has a preserve that abuts the Maurice River south of the Village of Mauricetown, extending southward nearly to Port Norris. The property is known as Mauricetown Preserve, and encompasses 1000

acres of which 60% is tidal marsh. This trail has a variety of habitats on or near it - upland woods, hardwood swamps, tidal marsh, vernal pools, and it also abuts a field.

The trail begins with a straight-away and then makes a loop. A sign at the trail head helps to orient visitors before they venture forth. Hiking companion Christine Brown and I did the loop counter-clockwise and found that the white trail blazes allow for travel in either direction. The northern edge of the trail borders the marshland but we did not come across any marsh viewscapes.



*This wayside trailhead sign is visible from North Ave.*



*There is an aerial view of the walking trail as shown above. The trail is marked in white on the aerial and white blazes are painted on the trees.*

*CU guides often suggest taking a picture with your mobile phone of any provided maps before beginning a hike. There are several applications that provide real-time maps; many of our members use AllTrails. The snapshot, however, can prove helpful if cell reception fails.*

One of the interesting topographical features is a large depression, 75' x 100', next to a massive willow oak tree. It looked as if it could be a vernal pond in wetter years. I spoke to Natural Lands property manager Brian Johnson and he confirmed that it can indeed be a very large pool, even extending across the trail when rainfall is abundant. Vernal pools are important habitat

for reptiles and amphibians, especially in the spring and early summer.

Brian shared some of the species of birds he has observed on the property. Two that are rare in our region are the pileated woodpecker and the red-shouldered hawk. For many years on the World Series of Birding our team traversed portions of this property to listen for Kentucky warbler, and for a long time they were able to check this bird off. One might say a real feather in their cap! But Kentucky warbler numbers have plummeted, and in recent years the team has had to leave it off their list of sightings.



Likely birds to hear or see, depending on the season, are pine warblers, wood thrush, nesting blue gray gnat-catchers and prothonotary warblers, black and white warblers, oven birds, and the normal cast of characters you would expect such as cardinals, chickadees, blue jays, downy and red-bellied woodpeckers, and other forest species. On the marsh there are osprey, clapper rail, great blue heron, American bald eagle, and kingfishers. Again, the marsh plain is not visible from the trail. However you may hear some of these birds call or see them fly.

A portion of the woods near the trail has hickories, a food plant for underwing moths. This species is a master of disguise, with a forewing that is mottled like tree bark. However the hind or underwing is very colorful, thus its name. It enables the moth to produce a startle effect when it first takes flight, displaying its bright hues unexpectedly, which gives it the extra moment to escape a would-be assailant.





*Top: Sorid underwing. Bottom: On a hot day in August preserve manager Brian Johnson took the photo of various underwing moths Iliia, Mourning and Sad Underwings – all of them very well camouflaged against the bark of the tree. BOTH Photos: Brian Johnson*

The site has lots of trees that are common in our coastal plain habitat: hollies, oaks, pines, and sweetgum among others. But one tree on the preserve that is rather unusual for southern New Jersey is ash. Additionally Brian shared that there is swamp oak which has a chestnut-oak-like leaf and bark like a white oak. So there are plenty of things to observe and enjoy.

We think you will find this 1.5 mile loop an enjoyable experience. Let me know if you visit it, and please share your impressions! You can email me at [forrivers@comcast.net](mailto:forrivers@comcast.net).