

East Woods: A Piece of the Past



The University of Vermont's (UVM) East Woods Natural Area consists of approximately 50 acres of mature, mixed hardwoods and conifers, and hosts plant and animal species of a common forest type in New England. As trees and plants age and decay, they create rich topsoil which feeds new growth to replenish the forest. Whether viewed from nearby roads and highways or up close on the walking trails, East Woods is an excellent example of what most of the Lake Champlain Valley looked like before intensive human settlement cleared the land.

Running through the middle of East Woods Natural Area is Potash Brook, which drains a 7.5 square mile watershed that includes some of Chittenden County's busiest highways, active farms, most extensive shopping malls, and densest residential neighborhoods and commercial development. Regional stormwater runoff has degraded much of the Potash Brook habitat. However, the East Woods Natural Area serves the important function of filtering and slowing stormwater as it flows through the Area, improving water quality and habitat. This section of the Brook supports dozens of aquatic invertebrates such as mayflies, caddisflies, dragonflies, and several fish species.

A walk along the trails reveals remnants of the past. The sandy soil here indicates that East Woods Natural Area (which is now at 240 feet in elevation) was once part of ancient shoreline, 11,000 years ago, when Lake Champlain was actually part of the Atlantic Ocean and much of today's shoreline was underwater. A raised earthen road and timber trestle near the streambed bear witness to an aborted attempt in 1898 to build a railroad from Burlington to the farming community of Hinesburg, about 11 miles from here. Natural forces such as high winds and winter storms leave the forest floor littered with broken branches and uprooted trees, creating organic material and sunlit openings in the forest canopy to help regenerate plant growth.



UVM's Natural Areas program manages this site as well as several others around the state. For more information, see www.uvm.edu/~envprog.



Jim Miller

One of the largest of all North American woodpeckers, the Pileated Woodpecker, *Dryocopus pileatus*, feeds on insects in dead and dying trees here, leaving a rectangular hole as its trademark.



Robert H. Mohlenbrock, USDA-NRCS Plants Database

Eastern Hemlock is one of the most tolerant of all trees here and survives under low-light conditions. It provides shelter and seeds for wild turkey and songbirds as well as winter cover and browse for deer.



Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission

Potash Brook winds 7.1 miles before emptying into Lake Champlain near the City of South Burlington's Red Rocks Park.

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