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For all to see: A virtual tour of Mount Higby

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MIDDLETOWN - When Environmental Resource Specialist James Sipperly guided a group tour of about 30 people up Higby Mountain last Sunday, the group saw deer, red-tail hawks, a gang of turkeys and even spotted a coyote.

Sipperly wants others, including those unable to hike, such as the disabled and elderly, to experience some of the majesty and wilderness of the mountain that spans the towns of Middletown and Middlefield. To bring the mountain to them, he came up with the idea of this virtual tour.

The equivalent of a three-hour venture, hikers walk through the normally closed Middletown Watershed land, onto the Blue Ridge Trail to the top of the mountain and across the ridge line.

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Sipperly has a keen eye and can spot a silent woodland creature waiting at a far distance along the path or on its perimeters. During tours he explains how this is done, while pointing out all manner of flora along the way.

"Look as far as your eyes can see," Sipperly said, pointing into the distance. "Focus on this and that."

One of the deer he pointed out on a private tour Wednesday stood far to the side of the road, its color was such a shade that it blended almost invisibly with the bark of the trees around where it watched, unmoving, until suddenly the beautiful creature bounced up and pranced away, crossing speedily by.

There were many deer, several of them in a couple of different small herds. Sipperly also managed to point out a tiny chipmunk peeking its little head through a pile of branches placed along an unmarked path.

The watershed is closed all year long and is opened only by officials like Sipperly or Water and Sewer Department Director Guy Russo. Russo wants to come up with more ideas for supervised tours and events to give people the chance to explore the property, Sipperly said.

Short of those occasions, there is absolutely no trespassing. If staff members spot trespassers they can, and sometimes will, have them arrested. Wednesday Sipperly let one intruder, walking with his dog down the dirt roadway through the property, off with a stern warning.

Protecting the watershed is one way of keeping pollutants out of drinking water.

The 1,700-acre property is not just pristine and beautiful; the land that surrounds reservoirs also catches water from the sky. All that water, because of the way the land and pools are situated, flows down into the reservoirs.

While it is not permissible to hike through the watershed uninvited, it is allowable to walk the mountain along the marked Blue Ridge Trail. The trail starts behind Guida's on Route 66 in Middlefield.

Coming from the watershed onto the blue trail, one walks up the slope, watching for loose rocks and climbing over step-like boulders. At the top the trail opens, the edge of the ridge overlooking Interstate 91, where far below traffic races past. Sipperly points out Suzio Quarry across the highway. The step-like rocks stare back across to Mount Higby.

"It's basically a lava flow," Sipperly said of the quarry, which he said was created when the continents broke apart.

He also points out Castle Craig, which looms opposite the mountain.

Wednesday he watched as a hawk flew above the tree line below and then landed in the branches, but as the cool wind blew, the air on the ridge cooled considerably, and Sipperly suggested moving to keep warm.

Back within the shield of the trees, where the wind was less able to cut through one's skin, Sipperly stopped to point out a hickory tree and spoke of a rare beetle discovered living beneath the bark during the Bio Blitz in the summer of 2007. That summer scientists and students spent days and nights searching the land along Mount Higby for whatever species that inhabit the area.

"They found many, many different species of butterflies and moths," Sipperly said.

He also pointed out a collection of talus rocks - an accumulation of broken rocks - where rattlesnakes and copperheads like to hide out. One way to know if a copperhead is around is if there is a smell reminiscent of fresh cucumbers, the environmental specialist said. The snake gives off that aroma.

Sipperly also indicated scratches on the path where he said a gang of turkeys had been digging for nuts or acorns. As he explained the markings, a sound similar to the cry of an animal broke the quiet. He pointed above, to the treetops and said the sound was made by two trees rubbing together in the wind.

"It's not an animal," he assured.

One of the sites Sipperly said interested folks on the group hike was one of several small carved monuments marking the lines between Middletown and Middlefield.

"So I'm standing in both towns now," he said as he stood before the carving.

The markers were erected in the late 1800s or early 1900s.

Back on the ridge, Sipperly pointed down to the Connecticut State Police Training Academy in Meriden, where students were working on shooting practice. While they did not shoot at any of the targets that can also be spotted from the mountain, the teacher coached the students with a megaphone. Often shooting is heard on the trail from the site, Sipperly said.

He showed the location where last fall firefighters did a mock rescue, lowering Jim Altman of Fox-61 News on a stretcher to the rocks below.

From another spot along the ridge, Sipperly pointed into the distance to where one of Sunday's hikers said was Long Island Sound. Even with all the miles between the Sound and the mountain, the vast pool of water was visible.

Every fall Sipperly guides hikers along the mountain and blue trail. The Blue Ridge Trail is a portion of the 114-mile Metacomet Trail, which extends from Connecticut to New Hampshire.

"Peak foliage was probably last weekend," Sipperly said at one point Wednesday.

Despite the passage of the best viewing time, he recommends taking a hike.

"It's gorgeous," he said.



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