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A perfect day at the Dahl Sanctuary

By Ed Parsons
 Apr 30, 2011 12:05 am

Last Saturday was a perfect day for a guided tour of the New Hampshire Audubon's 60 acre Dahl Sanctuary, located next to L.L. Bean in North Conway. It was raw, with wet snow turning to a cold drizzle. A dozen or so people braved the weather. "I was impressed by the number of people who showed up for the hike," said Phil Brown, director of land management on NH Audubon's 38 properties, which total 8,000 acres. "It was a commentary on the type of outdoor people in the area." The group met at Eastern Mountain Sports, walked a few hundred feet to the sanctuary entrance, walked the trail system of the sanctuary and returned to EMS later for cider, cookies, and conversation.



New Hampshire Audubon's Phil Brown stands next to an old silver maple while discussing the floodplain forest of the Dahl Sanctuary (NH Audubon photo)

The outing was billed as a grand reopening of the Dahl Sanctuary. Some recent history of the property is needed to appreciate that, but first, a description of this unique piece of land. Squeezed between the Saco River and a steep wooded bank adjacent to Route 16, the land includes a rare flood plain forest, a field left over from agricultural use, and a "cobble barren," or stone beach. The steep wooded bank protects the property from the highway above, giving a feeling of quiet isolation. This bank, which extends up the east side of the valley, was created by the old Saco River, which cut through sediment deposited on the bottom of the post-glacial Lake Pequawket, which filled the valley from Bartlett to Hiram.

The quiet nook of the Dahl property was used for timber harvesting, grazing sheep, and growing crops, and these uses helped create the diversity of the land there today. In 1988, the land was donated to NH Audubon by long time valley residents Helen and Ruth Dahl. After that, the field was usually cut annually to maintain bird habitat. Although not a lot more was done at the time, NH Audubon was aware of the uniqueness of the property, and in 1994, a natural resource inventory was performed by local Chris Lewey.

In 2004, NH Audubon president David Houghton promoted the idea of developing an Audubon learning center and store accessed by Route 16 and located on the northern end of the wooded bank, with the sanctuary behind it. This did not go over well with many north country locals, and NH Audubon members as well. Membership dropped. The president soon left.

Starting in 2005, a new vision for the land was initiated. NH Audubon, working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), part of the US Department of Agriculture, applied for a federal contract to implement conservation practices on the Dahl Sanctuary.

On this small dynamic piece of land, the possibility of enhancing and protecting the rarest habitat in the state--the flood plain forest--was possible. Most flood plain forests in the state were cut long ago to make way for agriculture. In the Dahl Sanctuary, a small flood plain forest exists today. Its primary species is the towering silver maple. One hope is to expand the forest over time back out into the field, and closer to its original state.

One of the first things done on the Dahl Sanctuary, was the mapping of invasive species of plants.

Then, about three years ago, Boyle Associates, an environmental consulting firm from Portland came on board. They contracted to eradicate invasive species (such as the Japanese Knotweed), and also did further inventory work. They also wrote a plan for the enhancement of the property with input from NH Audubon, then they carried out the work, including placing new information kiosks and signs.

If you visited the Dahl Sanctuary in its early years of the 1990s, you would be surprised if you went there today. After walking down the old farmer access road from L.L.Bean, you come out into the field. It used to be a uniform field. But now there is dug waterway part way across the field, built a year and a half ago, that connects with an old meander. In high water, an artificial wetland is created in the field. This not only enhances habitat for turtles, frogs, salamanders, great blue herons, and ducks. It is the first step in bringing back the flood plain forest. The silver maple loves to grow right next to water, and get its roots wet. Recently, silver maple seedlings have been planted in wet parts of the field, in hopes that they will take. When they do, they grow fast.

Also, just before you reach the field at the bottom of the farmer's access road, you will notice a new foot path to your left into the woods. This is part of the new circular path on the property. It goes along the edge between steep forest and flat field, and enters the unique cathedral-like flood plain forest of silver maples. Then it swings right back into the field, and connects with the old road out to the beach.

Saturday morning we found ourselves on the trail in the flood plain forest. It was a diverse group. There was an experienced birder from Jackson, who had never been there before. There were Audubon volunteers from other sanctuaries. Most of us had on modern foul weather gear, but a distinguished local woman had a long black rain coat and umbrella, and she seemed just as comfortable as the rest.

Nels Lijedahl and Debbie Eddison, the local contingent from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, were there. They had worked all along with Phil Brown on the Dahl Sanctuary plan. Also present was Rich Jordan from Boyle Associates. He had gotten his hands dirty in the planning and execution of the plan.

Just as importantly, the sanctuary stewards, Bill and Carol Vose of Conway were there. They lived within walking distance of the sanctuary, and spent many joyful hours there keeping an eye out, working on management and upkeep, and observing such things as the bird species that used the new nesting boxes in the field. They have cleaned up plastic bottles and cans that have been swept into the floodplain forest from the overflowing river. Their public awareness activity recently included being interviewed on WMMV Radio about the sanctuary.

Phil Brown led us on the trail through the wet forest. In the nearby field, there was a surprising accumulation of wet snow. We walked over to an old silver maple with a great diameter. Behind it was a flooded meander that had many springtime wood frog egg masses in it. As we turned the corner back out towards the field, Brown noted that parts of the field will not be replanted in floodplain forest. Rather, different parts of it will be cut down in five to 10 year cycles, making for an ever changing habitat of field and young forest. This is great habitat for the woodcock, which requires both field and brushy areas. Also, circular areas beneath nesting boxes in the field will be cut low so birds can directly feed on insects.

Brown noted that NH Audubon is looking for volunteers to help make the organization run, for example, someone who owns a "brush hog," needed to mow down the saplings in a young forest on the five to 10 year cycle. Volunteers for trail maintenance are also needed.

We turned onto the old road down to the cobble beach. As we walked close to the river bank, we saw the stumps of many young aspens recently cut by bank beaver that live in the river. Right on the bank, an older hardwood was girdled by them.

Finally, we walked out on the beach of smooth stones, a place that is easy to linger and watch the river flow by. It was a special place. In the past, before there was a gate on the access road to the Dahl Sanctuary out on Route 16, it had been a community swimming hole and occasional party place. Now, as snow fell in large wet flakes, it was quiet and haunting.

NH Audubon owns almost half of the cobble beach, and the adjoining floodplain forest. The remaining segments of each, down to the corner in the river directly below the northern lookout on Route 16, is owned by the town of Conway.

We walked up the cobble beach to the edge of the floodplain forest on the NH Audubon land to see two endangered species of plant--silverling and hairy hudsonia. There were over 300 small patches of silverling there, that were slowly invading the cobble beach now that the human impact is less. The hairy hudsonia was less prolific, growing in a few clumps. It was found in only a couple other places on the entire Saco River.

There was a touch of wildness in seeing these endangered plants, that are repeatedly swept by wind and water. They represent, as does the entire Dahl Sanctuary, the goals of NH Audubon. Its mission is to preserve and protect the New Hampshire natural environment, for both wildlife and people. The fact that we were enjoying these endangered plants in their stark environment, accomplished the second part of its goal.

It was raining when we walked back on the dirt road by the river, reconnected with the loop trail, and finally climbed up the old access road to the parking lot at L.L. Bean, and across to EMS for some well deserved warmth and refreshment.

To visit the Dahl Sanctuary, pull into the front of L.L. Bean, and park as close as you can to the sanctuary entrance at the further end. It is recommended that you thoroughly read the natural and human history on the new kiosk at the start of the walk. On your way out, you can sign the book and leave your impressions. For more information and for those interesting in volunteering, call NH Audubon at 224-9909.
