

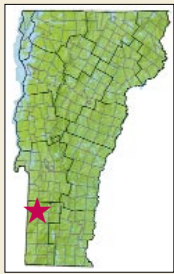


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Over the next many issues of the Oak Log, we will bring you profiles of our visitable preserves in Vermont. You may also download these profiles or a copy of our preserve guide from our website at nature.org/vermont. We invite you to visit and enjoy.

EQUINOX HIGHLANDS



Rising from the nutrient-rich bedrock of the Taconic Mountains, the Equinox Highlands are home to one of the finest and most extensive examples of rich northern hardwood forest in the Northeast. More than twenty species of rare plant and two species of globally rare bat can be found in this northernmost sweep of the Taconic Mountains. Here the peaks of Mount Equinox (3,852 ft) and Mother Myrick (3,361 ft) reach for the clouds and an extensive underground system of caves moves pure, clear water beneath the hills.

Elevations in the Highlands range from 1,200 to 3,852 feet and nearly three quarters of the land cover consists of side slopes, upper slopes, hollows and summits. These steep slopes, which allow for the free movement of water and nutrients, combined with the calcium-rich soils that drape Mt. Equinox and Mother Myrick, create ideal conditions for rich northern hardwood forest. This forest community is typically only found in small patches, but in the Highlands it covers an expanse of nearly two thousand acres.

There are perhaps few places in Vermont that can rival the Highlands in their abundance of spring ephemerals and other wildflowers such as bloodroot, hepatica, Dutchman's breeches, trillium, wild leek, wild ginger, squirrel corn, and toothwort. An abundance of plant species in the understory is an important characteristic of rich northern hardwood forests. Studies of quarter-acre plots in Vermont and New York identified an average of 48 herb species in a rich northern hardwood forest compared to an average 27 species in other hardwood forest communities.

The Equinox Highlands consists of 7,000 acres of contiguous forest. Protecting large connected landscape-scale areas like this benefits forest communities such as rich northern hardwood forests by making them more resistant to disturbance. It also allows for the free movement of species like wide-ranging mammals. In the Highlands, the Conservancy has conserved over 1,700 acres through ownership and another 109 acres by easement. Complementary activities by the Equinox Preservation Trust, the Green Mountain National Forest, UVM and the Vermont Land Trust are advancing conservation in the Highlands, for the benefit of both the human and animal inhabitants.

Driving Directions

Although there are no Conservancy trails in this natural area, there is a network of unmarked logging roads that can lead adventurous hikers, cross-country skiers, and snowshoers to the top of Mother Myrick or through Beartown Notch to Sandgate. (Motorized vehicles like ATV's are not permitted as they can track in invasive species and cause erosion.)

From Route 7A traveling north in Manchester Village, take a left on West Road (this is the name used in the Vermont Gazetteer — the street sign says West Dorset Road) past the Southern Vermont Arts Center. Take a left on Three Maple Drive. Your second left is Beartown Road. Park here at the intersection of Three Maple and Beartown. Walk a half-mile up Beartown until you see the Conservancy boundary signs, then follow the main logging road toward Mother Myrick Mountain.



Libby Davidson

Featured Natural Community: Rich Northern Hardwood Forest

Considered a quintessential Vermont forest type, this natural community is dominated by sugar maple. White ash and basswood are also common trees. The presence of blue cohosh and wood nettle in the herb layer are good indicators of rich northern hardwood forest.

For a guide to managing rich northern hardwood forest, visit nature.org/vermont and look under "Publications."