



Sarah Wakefield



View across the White River.

WHITE RIVER LEDGES NATURAL AREA



Nestled in the Southern Vermont Piedmont region on the shores of the White River is a protected area containing several natural communities that are representative of the region, including floodplain forest and northern hardwood forest. A walk through the hills here can yield surprising views of the valley landscape and of unexpected species like the distinctive rattlesnake plantain orchid.

Several natural communities at this preserve are directly adjacent to the White River. Floodplain forests are found on the lowest land near the river, where soils are subject to annual flooding but become relatively dry during the summer months. Clays and silts deposited by the flooding river are rich in organic matter and help these forests to develop. Along this section of the White River, floodplain forests are found in small patches on either side of the river, and on small islands. They are dominated by ash-leaved maple, with occasional cottonwoods and white ash. The forest floor is often covered with chest-high ostrich ferns, as well as other herbs, ferns, and sedges. Floodplain forests are no longer common in Vermont, because many of the state's nutrient-rich floodplains have been converted for agricultural use.

Another rare riverside community found here is the calcareous riverside seep. This natural community occurs only in areas where calcium-rich groundwater seeps through exposed bedrock on river shores. The bedrock is maintained in an open condition by annual river flooding and ice scour. Larger woody plants cannot gain a foothold, but the nutrient-rich water seeping through bedrock crevices is an ideal habitat for many unusual grasses, forbs, sedges, and mosses.

Northern hardwood forest, a community dominated by American beech, sugar maple, and yellow birch, and pockets of rich northern hardwood forest grow on the upland areas of White River Ledges Natural Area. Rich northern hardwood forest communities occur where rich humus and the downslope movement of



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Rattlesnake Plantain Orchid

calcium-laden water provide vegetation with a steady supply of nutrients. As a result, plant diversity and overall growth is greater in this forest type than in regular northern hardwood forest, which lacks the characteristically rich herb layer found in rich northern hardwood forests.

The Conservancy currently owns and manages 186 acres at White River Ledges Natural Area. Visitors are welcome, though due to the sensitive nature of some of the communities here, we ask that visitors stay on the trail.

Driving Directions

From I-89 take exit 2 for the town of Sharon. From the exit, travel south on Route 14 about 5 miles. As you enter the village of West Hartford, take a right and cross the green metal bridge. After the crossing, make a sharp right onto Pomfret Road. Travel 1 mile and turn right onto White River Lane. Park at the pull-off just after the turn. You may not be able to see the trailhead sign from here. Just walk back to Pomfret Road toward the upland area and look up at the hill for the preserve sign.

From White River Junction: Travel north on Route 14 for 7 miles until you reach the village of West Hartford. Take a left and cross a green metal bridge. After crossing the bridge, make a sharp right onto Pomfret Road. Travel 1 mile and turn right onto White River Lane. Park at the pull-off just after the turn. You may not be able to see the trailhead sign from here. Just walk back to Pomfret Road toward the upland area and look up at the hill for the preserve sign.

Note: Please do not drive beyond the pull-off. The private road is a dead end.