The flat topography and youthful habitats of the Gustavus Forelands lie in striking contrast to the rugged terrain and old growth forest covering most of southeast Alaska. The Nature Conservancy partnered with the community of Gustavus in an effort to purchase and protect this unique area. With assistance from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ducks Unlimited, and hundreds of private donors over 4,000 acres were purchased. The resulting Gustavus Forelands Preserve, owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy, includes four and a half miles of beach front and large tracts of coastal wetlands.

Animal sign (and occasionally sightings) of black bear, wolf, coyote, porcupine, and squirrel is common along the trail. Spring and fall the Gustavus Preserve is transformed by the arrival of thousands of migrating lesser sandhill cranes. The extensive mudflats also attract a diversity of shorebird species including golden plover, dunlin, sanderling, and Western and spotted sandpipers. The sloughs and streams provide food for a diversity of dabbling ducks and geese including white-fronted geese, snow geese, brant and Canada geese. Songbird species breeding on the preserve include ruby-crowned kinglet, junco, rufous hummingbird, hermit and Swainson's thrushes, song sparrow, fox sparrow, savannah sparrow, chickadees, three-toed woodpecker, white-breasted nuthatch and brown creeper.

Black Bear

Blue Grouse

Moose

The Nagoonberry Loop Trailhead is just a quarter mile from the paved road running through the center of Gustavus. Glen's Ditch Road, about halfway between the gas station and the airport, dead ends at the parking lot. Except during extreme rains the gravel trail is free of standing water. The trail is 2.2 miles long with benches located at two scenic outlooks. Allow 45 minutes to two hours to complete the loop. Making a bit of noise while you hike should keep from startling the moose and bears that frequent the area.

The mission of The Nature Conservancy is to preserve the plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive.

Trail contruction was made possible through grants from Alaska State Parks and Recreation and SEATrails. Photographs by Sean Nielsen, illustrations and cartography by Richard Carstensen.

Nagoonberry flowers and fruits are common along the trail.

The Nature Conservancy
Protecting nature. Preserving life.™

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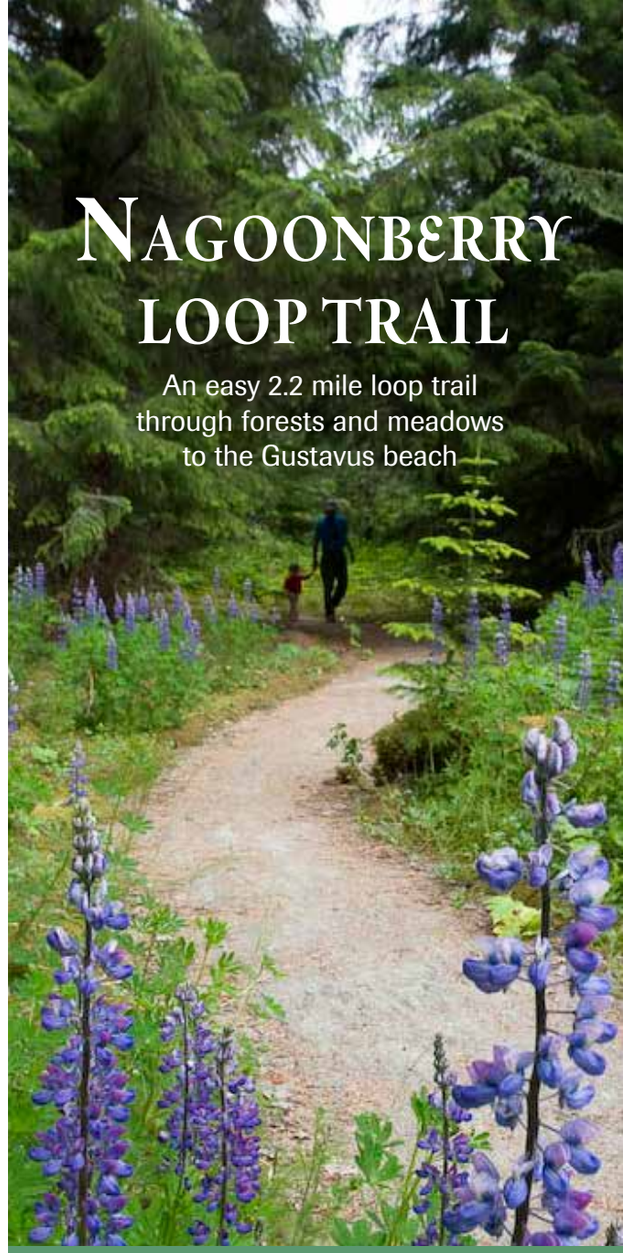
NAGOONBERRY LOOP TRAIL

An easy 2.2 mile loop trail through forests and meadows to the Gustavus beach



Gustavus Forelands Preserve

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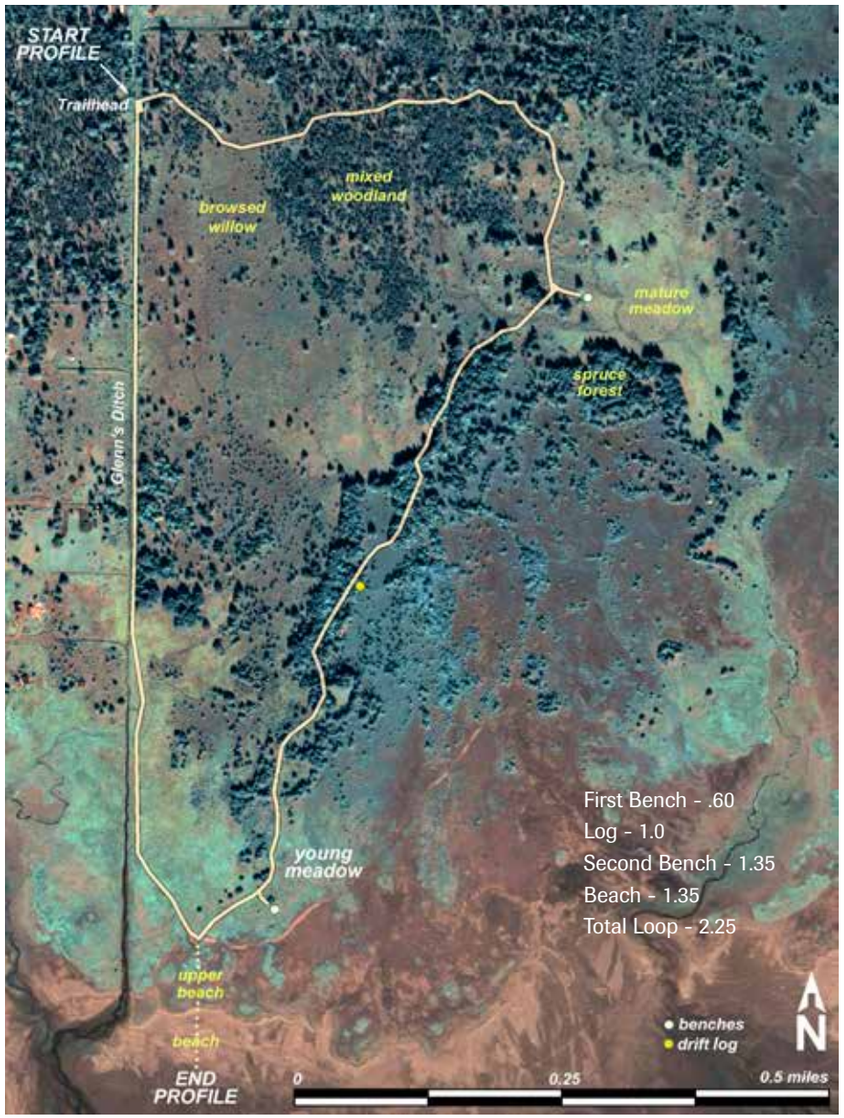
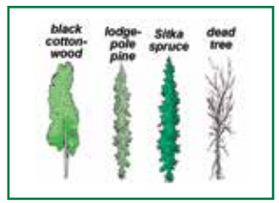


The Nagoonberry Loop Trail (in yellow) is superimposed on the adjacent satellite imagery. The mosaic of colors reflects the diversity of habitats. Stretch the trail, from the parking lot to the beach, into a straight line and you get the profile of habitats at the bottom of the page. Written descriptions of the habitats are to the right


Lupine



Habitats on the trail

Eighty-five years ago high tide would have covered the Nagoonberry Loop trailhead. Now it's nearly a mile from the sea. Released from the weight of retreating glaciers, the Gustavus landscape is rebounding an average 1.5 inches/year, the world's fastest uplift. Sands that once housed clams and worms now support spruce and willow trees. The trail winds through the diversity of colonizing plants comprising the following habitat types.

Mixed Woodland The high water table in the mixed woodland keeps the pine, spruce and cottonwood trees from thriving. The slow-growing, widely spaced trees allow enough light to reach the forest floor to support a lush understory of dogwood, false lily of the valley, nagoonberry, and fiddlehead ferns.

Browsed Willow In areas too wet to support conifers several species of willows dominate. In the 1960's the first moose arrived in Gustavus and thrived on the young willows. The moose herd blossomed and now keeps the willow trees browsed down to stubby shrubs. Irises, several species of horsetail, sweet gale, and other wet tolerant species grow in between the moose-browsed willows.

Mature Meadow A bench just off the trail (white dot on map) looks out over an open meadow. The dense matt of grasses, chocolate lilies, shooting star, and dandelions keep spruce and other tree seeds from getting established. Strawberries and nagoonberries growing on the meadow's margins provide mid-summer food for grazing bears.

Spruce Forest In the driest areas spruce trees thrive. Their wide branches shade out light loving meadow species leaving a mat of dark-tolerant mosses. Although the dark forest offers little food to foraging bears and birds it provides crucial shelter. After filling up on strawberries in the adjacent meadow a bear can peacefully nap in the secluded trees. A bird gleaning insects over an open slough can evade raptors by darting into the dense branches of spruce.

Young Meadow The recently emerged lands near the beach support a thriving community of early colonizers. Head-high cow parsnip towers over purple lupine, beach pea, angelica, wild strawberry, and paint brush. The bench overlooking the beach meadow is nestled against young spruce trees which will later shade out the light-loving plants.

Upper Beach Salt tolerant species like rye grass and beach pea anchors the shifting sands of the upper inner tidal zone. These species creep down the beach as the land rises.

Beach The vegetated high intertidal community comes to an abrupt edge at the sandy flats.

Drift Logs Trail builders cut through several large logs during construction. The biggest is more than twice the diameter of the young spruce growing around it. How does an old tree end up decaying within such a young forest? Answer: If it grew some where else. The large logs along the trail floated on the tide. As the land rose over the decades the logs were lifted farther and farther from the sea. The logs stranded near today's tide line will be integrated into the forests of the future.