



Friends of Thacher State Park

Emma T Thacher Nature Center • 87 Nature Center Way • Voorheesville, NY 12186
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November Mysteries



During November the woods are gray and dreary. Yet if you walk on the Hop Field Yellow trail, or elsewhere at Thacher, you may encounter a shrub covered with pale yellow flowers. People have come up with many descriptors for these flowers: they are like fairy laundry, like flags or banners, like spidery whisk brooms, or even like cheerleaders' pompoms. These Witch Hazel flowers are interesting in a couple of ways. The first is that the flowers and fruit open simultaneously, the seeds in the woody capsules having been pollinated a year earlier. The two shiny black seeds explode out of their capsules and can fly as far as 30 feet. The mysterious popping sound made as these seeds hit dry leaves on the forest floor must have puzzled rural folk. It's possible that the name Witch Hazel came from the rural belief that when the flowers bloomed, the witches danced.

The second interesting thing is that for many years, people did not know which insects pollinated Witch Hazel flowers since they don't start blooming till the

end of October when most insects are down for the winter. Yet the yellow flowers and lemony scent indicate evolution to attract insects. Some writers said it must be gnats or late-flying bees. However, several patient naturalists watched Witch Hazel shrubs for hours and never saw anything other than a few ants.



Finally a scientist named Bernd Heinrich discovered that Witch Hazel flowers are pollinated by a few species of night-flying owl moths. These moths continue to fly in November and December. They are able to shiver to get their body temperature up to the necessary 86 degrees in order to fly. Though these moths mostly feed on the sap of injured trees, they also flock to the nectar of Witch Hazel blossoms, pollinating them in the process. Though the pollination of Witch Hazel is no longer a mystery, in some ways a fuzzy moth that is able to fly through winter nights by shivering to warm its wing muscles is even more magical than witches dancing in the woods.

-by Sigrin Newell



Photos by Jacqueline Donnelly

The Long Path in Thacher Park—"a Tale of Two Trails"



For some time, the Long Path (northbound) came down from "High Point" to the Thacher park boundary line, then down the "ski hill" to Beaver Dam road, where, at a gravel pull-off, it entered straight into the woods.

The Long Path entrance into the woods was marked and, turning left, it also met the Blue Loop Trail.

At some point, the private lands on the hill changed ownership and the new owner blocked off the trail. The Long Path then had to be re-routed, and from the west, one had to walk on Elm Drive and Bush Road to Beaver Dam Road.



At some time a tree was cut down, lodged in a forked stump and blocked the entrance trail. A short "dog-leg" reroute went around it to a fork, and the trail divided left and right to the blue trail.



At some point later, a new trail was cut in off the road, short, straight, wider, and even with gravel at the beginning. It was only 20 feet or so west from the Long Path. Over time, the new trail was used more, and the

old Long Path became a bit overgrown, but was still marked with the turquoise blazes. We had noticed this discrepancy for some time, and late this past summer we remedied the situation.

We decided to use the newer, short trail as the Long Path entrance, since hikers on Beaver Dam road would get to that trail first, anyway.

I made new signs for the trail junction: "The Long Path in Thacher Park" (with distances to the Overlook, Visitor Center, High Point cliff, and Old Stage Road), and also for the Blue Loop Trail - with its distance and appropriate Long Path blazes, and directional arrows at the trail's turns. The old trail had its blazes removed, and the trail was "erased".



So - now the Long Path trail off Beaver Dam road (at the entrance to Thacher park) is well marked, clearly signed, and is a vast improvement over what it had been.

- by Jim & Bonnie Schaller

Check for updates at www.friendsofthacherpark.org

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As always, call 872-0800 or 872-1237 to verify activity times and dates.

Please feel free to call any board member with questions or suggestions.

Many thanks to Sigrin Newell, Jacqueline Donnelly, Jim Schaller, Bonnie Schaller, Brian Horl and Nancy Engel for their contributions to this newsletter.

Want to contribute? Please email me at cgervasi@albany.edu
Christine Gervasi—Editor

Monarch Ranch 2018

In the September/October 2018 Friends newsletter Christine Gervasi wrote a fine article about the “Miraculous Monarchs”. The pictures that went with it were of the first 5 of 23 chrysalises we were able to “rear” to adulthood this past summer.

This little miracle really got its start in 2017, when we saw a lot of Monarch caterpillars on the milkweed around the yard. We soon learned that the life of these caterpillars was tenuous at best as one day we’d see them and the next all that we could find were the empty leaves. Even though we now know that those little critters have the habit of “roaming”, it seems that their survival rate is abysmal. Even if not tasty to birds, the birds do have to eat their first one.

July 2018 saw a bumper crop of milkweed. It seemed to behave and stay out of the flowers, so we let it go, which resulted in caterpillars galore. As Jenny Young wrote in the September 2017 newsletter, we turned over every leaf looking for them. The first three we found went to the Nature Center. The next five were in the pictures in the past newsletter. Thank goodness for YouTube and articles, as we needed some guidance. As we began taking in “boarders”, housing began to be an issue. The original dog food container was increased by a big cardboard box with screening on top. We really began to get into this as we found eggs, hatched them into what is called “black heads” and watched them grow. This required yet another container, as they are REALLY small and need a plastic

mayonnaise jar and cheese cloth over the top. As they got bigger, they moved into the next larger container until they got really fat and looked like they were ready to “J” hook (hanging upside down and look like a **J**). Their hanging upside down is a prelude to the beautiful chrysalis. Their last stop was the box where they ate a little, but were more intent on their big change, though we DID find one walking up the kitchen wall one morning. Yes we kept this farm in the kitchen.

Feeding and keeping house was a twice-a-day chore – often with magnifying glasses to see those little guys. I’ll bet not everyone keeps a baggie full of milkweed leaves next to the butter and Riesling in their refrigerator!

By the time September 2018 rolled around we were “fledging” one or more a day. We kept track of male and females, but had to give that up, if we were away. To allow the chrysalises to open naturally and the butterflies leave, we’d put the box without the cover securely on a shelf under a picnic table under our roof eave. Those that had to hatch in this way could leave at their leisure.

We may try this again next year, armed with some knowledge gained by the seat of our pants. We found out we did inspire some folks to try this and we know that a lot of schools encourage these projects just as the Nature Center has.

**Here’s to the
Monarch!**

- by *Bonnie Schaller*



Friends of Thacher Park Annual Meeting

November 14 (Thacher Visitor Center). A short business meeting at 6:30pm is followed at 7:00pm by a talk on “Is the Earth Running a Fever?” by retired Meteorologist Hugh Johnson. Come join us!

Please note that the NYSDOT is currently repairing a culvert at Thacher Park near the Paint Mine trail head, and that the road between the Visitor Center and the Overlook is currently closed. If you are approaching the Visitor Center from the east via Route 85, use Beaver Dam road as a detour. Culvert repairs are anticipated to last until November 27th.

Friends of Thacher Park
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87 Nature Center Way
Voorheesville, New York 12186-2601



Wednesday, November 14, 2018

Annual Membership Meeting

Next:

6:30 pm at Thacher Visitor Center (see p. 3 for road closures)

A short business meeting is followed by a presentation on climate change by retired Meteorologist Hugh Johnson at 7:00 pm—Come join us!

Sitting on my porch on a beautiful September evening got me thinking about the transition from summer to fall. So many things in nature are changing this time of year. We no longer hear the calls of the amphibians or the songs of many of the birds. There are fewer and fewer bats around and we lose the wonderful light shows of the fireflies. The hummingbirds along with many others have left us for warmer climates. Soon the “snow birds” will join them.

What we will gain are the sounds of insects and the honking of geese as the flock up for their trip. We get wonderful local apples and great winter vegetables from the garden or local

farmers markets, and who could leave out fresh warm cider doughnuts from the orchards. I also find that I see more meteorites streaking through the night sky as fall approaches. And last, we get the awesome change of colors as the season progresses. What I hope you get from this is to get out and just enjoy nature more and observe the seasonal changes no matter the time of year, be it in your own back yard or in a beautiful park, like Thacher, at the Visitor Center or on the trails at Thompson Lake. It is time very well spent, especially if you can share it with a child or loved one. Enjoy.

- *Brian Horl*



As always, you can find a color version of the newsletter at www.friendsofthacherpark.org