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Natural Communities of the Hundred Acre Wood

by Jennifer Traub, volunteer with Blue Hill Heritage Trust

On a recent Blue Hill Heritage Trust hike through the Hundred Acre Wood in Brooklin, naturalist Cathy Rees led a group through a variety of habitats and revealed “new ways of seeing the landscape,” according to one of the participants.

Rees guided the group in reading the clues that individual plant and tree species offer about their surroundings. The native rhododendron *Rhodora* likes moisture, so a grouping of that plant suggested a spot with wetter soil. In another part of the woods, the presence of a red pine tree indicated the possibility of rare moths and butterflies hosted by this particular species.

If each plant or tree offers information about its setting, imagine what a group of plants and trees commonly found together might convey about the conditions, processes, and resources associated with their habitat. With a master’s degree in ecology and 15 years of experience conducting natural resource inventories throughout midcoast Maine, Rees showed the group how patterns of topography, soil, ground cover, plants, shrubs, and trees can be used to identify distinct “natural communities” within a landscape.

The Hundred Acre Wood trail starts out in an open wooded area with abundant huckleberry bushes. Characterizing this as “pine woodland,” Rees called attention to abundant shrubs and lack of tree canopy. Pointing to some exposed rock visible underfoot, Rees explained, “the ledge controls what can or can’t grow.”

An area of deeper soil with better drainage featuring spruce, fir, red maple, and gray birch was defined as “red spruce – northern hardwood,” a designation that has many variations. The shrub understory here was sparser, with an abundance of mossy ground cover.

An “evergreen seepage swamp” area was striking in its lack of understory and its transition to only red cedar trees.

Rees referenced the Maine Department of Conservation, which recently published *Natural Landscapes of Maine*, as the source of the classification system used to inventory natural resources in Maine. These inventories are an essential tool that help land trusts focus their efforts on properties with high conservation value and document the resources being protected for each property.

With so much variation in the landscape, Rees acknowledged that defining areas can be challenging: if there is an island of something different within a similar landscape, do you lump it in with the broader habitat or define it individually? Sometimes a small area or individual specimen might still have important conservation value. For example, a significant ecological asset of the Hundred Acre Wood is a “pocket swamp” within the red spruce-hardwood forest that provides a rich habitat for birds.

Named after the mythical A.A. Milne woodland by the family of Stephen Winthrop and M. Jane Williamson, who generously donated the land to BHHT, the Hundred Acre Wood ultimately retained a sense of mystery despite the new knowledge participants gained about its values and ecology. Rees emphasized the dynamic quality of the landscape, citing some of the many factors that shape it over time – temperature and moisture levels, sunlight, seed propagation cycles of different species, and wildlife impact on species growth and survival. There is no single trajectory mapped out, and these “hidden processes” are part of what Rees finds endlessly fascinating about her work.

Discover the beauty and mystery of these Brooklin woods and BHHT’s many other trails. For a list of trails, directions, and maps, visit our website, bluehillheritagetrust.org.

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Photo caption:

A group of hikers take in the beauty--and significance--of the red spruce-northern hardwood forest on Blue Hill Heritage Trust’s Hundred Acre Wood trail in Brooklin during a program led by naturalist Cathy Rees.