



VIRTUAL GUIDED NATURE WALK

EDGAR M. TENNIS PRESERVE



The variety of habitats at different stages of plant succession, the grand trees, and especially in winter, the offshore rafts of eider ducks seen here make this preserve a favorite of many. We know from archeological finds that Native Americans camped along these shores for up to 2,000 years. Deeds from the 1790s show that this land was settled by the Toothaker family, followed by Pickerings. John Pickering came to this country just a few years after the Mayflower landed. Dr. Edgar M. Tennis purchased what was then the Davis farm in 1947 and subsequently gave to the State of Maine a tract of considerable shoreline. Later his daughter Mimi Asbornsen gave more property to the state as well as conservation easements conveyed to IHT, fortunately including the right to visit the Civil War era cemetery. Island Heritage Trust now manages the preserve.

At the Tennis Preserve we will describe three general expeditions. First there is a short loop, less than a mile, from the parking spots to the foundation of the Pickering Farm. With a left turn at the shore, that trail takes you along Pickering Cove to return to the road by which you entered the preserve and the short walk back to your car. This loop is all easy walking.

The next option takes a longer loop, more than a mile, around the point of land and allows for a short detour to the little cemetery. Parts of this walk are fairly challenging, but you get to enjoy the shore trail views and a scramble at low tide takes you to The Oven, a mini-beach nestled in the pink granite. The third option is actually a set of trails, more than a mile, that lead to the foundations of the Davis homestead and the varied habitats you would expect of abandoned farmland.



A short walk up through the woods brings you to an intersection sign and an old field with the remains of a cellar hole, that was once the Pickering place. As humans come and go and change the landscape, fields turn back into forests in a predictable succession.



Look to the left of the field for a line of tall shrubs, staghorn sumac, *Rhus hirta*. The leaves of sumac in autumn are probably among the most outstanding of fall colors, unsung heroes, if you will. The sunny edges of such fields are often ringed with staghorn sumac—no relation to poison sumac which we do not have here on the Island. The fuzzy red fruit clumps of our staghorn sumacs are a food source for birds in fall and winter and also make a somewhat tasty tea. Brew them for about fifteen minutes and the cooled infusion tastes like “lemonade”. The bare branches stand erect long after the colorful leaves have fallen looking like a herd of bucks.



Sumac volunteers readily on disturbed soil and thrives in harsh conditions. That tells you that many folks consider it a weed, doesn't it?



This field is quite a good place to pause and look for butterflies. There are three quite common ones, each about the size of pocket change, that may at first acquaintance all look like “little brown jobbies”. To some extent, their emergence dates will give you a clue as to which is which. The early summer ones are apt to be the Ringlets, pictured on the left. Then come the Crescents, middle, and then skippers such as the Northern Dash pictured on the right. However, their emergence dates may overlap or they may produce a second brood and confuse matters further.

Nevertheless, their flight patterns will help you distinguish between them. The ringlets fly and flap slowly, very low over the grass. The crescents flutter more energetically over lawns and seem to love to land on hot sandy roads. The smallest ones flashing by may well be skippers.

They zig-zag and zip by almost faster than you can see them. The skippers are a large group of Lepidoptera distinct from both butterflies and moths by the way they hold their wings—folded at angles reminiscent of paper airplanes.

Learning to use behavioral cues and forming an impression and knowing a bit about what is likely - and when - will enable you to perform quite remarkable feats of identification and almost always be correct. This is as true for birds and butterflies as it is for the friend you recognize from a great distance walking down the street.

The variety of habitats here at Tennis Preserve offers many choices for animals. This is a good place to learn to tell the difference between the ragged cut that deer make pulling off a nibble because they lack upper incisors and the clean cut that snowshoe hares make when they browse bushes and shrubs.

Biologists call them *Lepus Americanus* or varying hare. Some of us call them snowshoe hares. Others call them rabbits, another genus entirely.

In winter they are white, but spring finds them shedding to become brown. A late snowstorm may leave them exposed in the “wrong” color.



winter



summer

Both deer and hare thrive on land once cleared for farming. You can tell much from their droppings or scat. In winter the hard pellets of the deer make piles of dark raisin-like marbles. When their diet changes in spring thanks to all that green roughage they are consuming, their droppings become loose piles. The hares leave grassy round, light brown marbles as calling cards. In spring if you are lucky enough to startle a hare, you might observe how fully brown it has turned. You may also startle a doe. She will make a loud snort and distract you from any fawns hidden in their beds. Do take her suggestion and retreat.

Skirting the herd of “antlered” sumacs and field you approach Pickering Cove and are presented with a choice. Turn left for the short and pleasant way back or turn right for a long and lovely walk that requires a few scrambles. For now, we will turn left, the short way with designated Points of Interest.



The coves at Tennis Preserve are a prime spot to watch winter rafts of Common Eider ducks and listen to the strange courting noises they make. They sound like African wildebeests. Wintering here at the southern edge of their breeding range, these large flocks are one of the wildlife wonders of the world. You may find eiders feeding on mussels out in the cove at any time of year. Nearer shore you may see the up-ended shapes of Black Ducks dabbling in the shallows.



You are looking across Pickering Cove past Little Thrumcap Island to Big and Little Hay and Big Freese Island in the distance on the right. Through the generosity of the Reardon family, most of Freese Island is now protected by conservation easement. Several other families in this area have also granted easements to insure the future integrity of the shore and land.

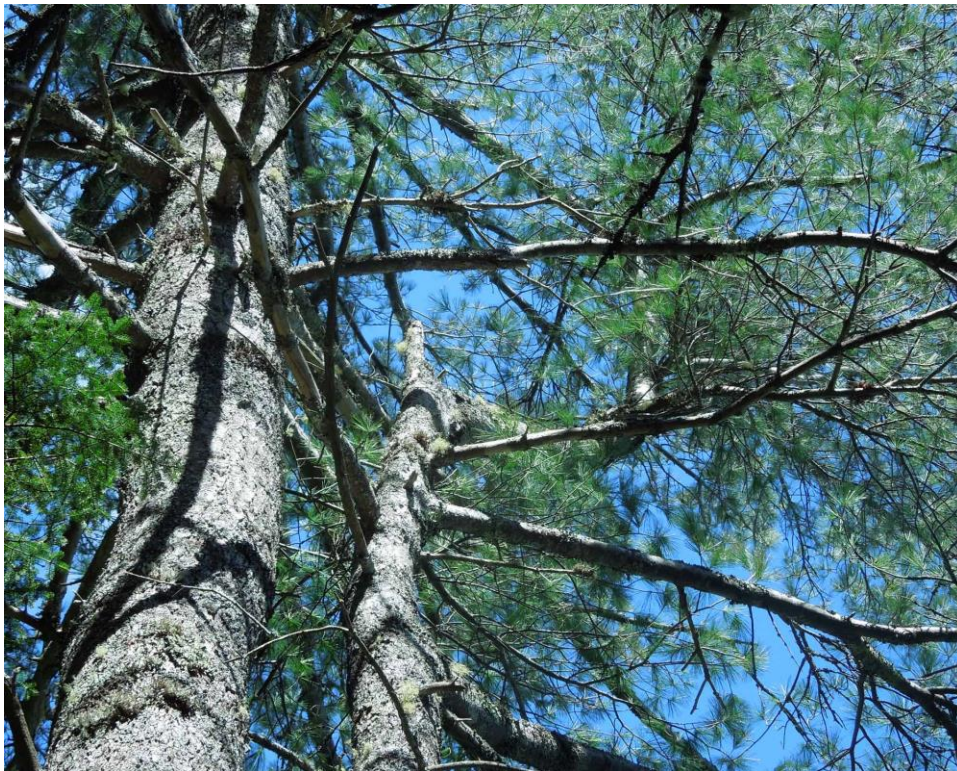
In 1972, Dr. Tennis made his original gift of 100 acres to the State of Maine, before there even was an Island Heritage Trust. Subsequently his daughter gave three more additions of land with conservation easements to be held by IHT.

It is the efforts of various land owners acting as a group which assure that habitat of plants and animals and the watershed stays intact for years to come. Heirs are enabled to resist development pressures while still enjoying the homes they cherish. These mosaics create win-win situations for everyone as the town benefits from the tax revenue from the houses, the general public has the enjoyment of some public access areas, and the natural world endures.

You might wish to be part of such a valuable effort. We hope you will consider joining IHT. Your contributions help cover the expenses of running a land trust and ensure that this preserve will be well kept for generations of families to come.



Look on your left for the rectangular holes made by feeding Pileated woodpeckers. They take their name from the resemblance of their red top knots to red crests of ancient Roman Legionnaires' helmets. A bit further on you will find the long needles of a white pine on the path. Look up.



White pine is found all over New England. Pick up a cluster of the long pine needles and you will find them in bundles of five. The cones too are distinctive.



Although many people call every evergreen a pine, here on Deer Isle the evergreen is more likely to be a spruce, at least on the east side of the island. You will see many of the long thin spruce cones of white spruce here on the Tennis Preserve. The host of soil and climate conditions here evidently better suit the spruce preferences. Scientists use the term “edaphic” to refer to the soil characteristics rather than the climate conditions. The pH, the bedrock origin, and drainage factors all combine to create the sandy pine barrens in New Jersey and southern Maine that are examples of an edaphic climax, where pines inhabit an area almost exclusively.



Large white pines are usually those that escaped the loggers. Look for the big old trees along stone walls where farmers left the trees to shade their livestock or at places such as this, at steep water's edge, where retrieving the logs was inconvenient. (Note to would-be hikers at Tennis Preserve: this trail and the longer portion which also skirts the water's edge may be considered too challenging for the very young or old with balance issues.)



Look across the water at the far bank. The gray-green layer below the grasses, above and slightly overhanging the cobble layer is a good example of a band of spongy marine clay. Geologists call it the Presumpscot Formation where extensive deposits were laid down in pre-glacial valleys back in the Pleistocene when much of coastal Maine, including Deer Isle, was submerged.

These ancient “blue clay” deposits may contain plant and animal fossils. Marine clay deposits once supported Maine brick-making and pottery making. Deposits of marine clay contracting and expanding as they freeze and thaw during our winters make for buckles and pot holes where they underlie our roads.

While you may not think of fine rock flour particles settling out as particularly dynamic, something very valuable happens here at every high tide. Silt, clay, and sand form a size gradient. The root network of the salt grasses traps the fine particles and forms the ongoing deposition of silts that you observe here at the mouth of the stream to your left. Here begins a chain of relationships influencing the fate of our marine resources off shore. You can spot where this small stream empties into the cove. The map calls it Great Brook, Yankee understatement?

As this short loop returns to the parking areas and the main road, there is enough light for mixed hardwoods such as Yellow birch (below). Notice the horizontal banding of creamy yellow.



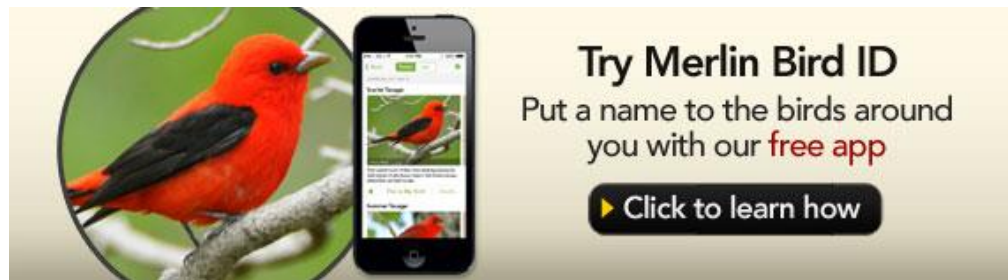
Wildflowers such as wintergreen, goldthread and bunchberry (below) bloom here.



Now let us return to the Pickering field and assume you take the paths to the right, leading into the woods. (You might recognize that this long counterclockwise loop will bring you back to the T intersection at the shore where you could have taken the short way home or you could have chosen to follow the long loop along the shore in a clockwise direction.)



Many visitors say that the woods at Tennis Preserve make this their favorite preserve. In the spruces here you may be rewarded with the song of the Winter Wren or the Hermit Thrush or glimpses of warblers flitting overhead. The most common early one is a Yellow-rumped warbler; then come the very obliging Black-throated Green warblers, and perhaps at the very top of the tree, you may see the bright flame throat of the Blackburnian warbler. These days there are many wonderful apps for birding but you cannot do better than checking out the free web site of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology for photos and sounds and interesting data.



There are both spruce and Balsam fir trees here. In the photograph below you can see that the sharp spruce needles (branch at top) go around the stem. The blunt fir needles (branch below) form a flat plane. If you turn the fir branch over, you can see fine white lines running the length of the needles.



Even in summer you can feel how the trees hold the cold air. In spring these paths may be slow to give up their winter snow.



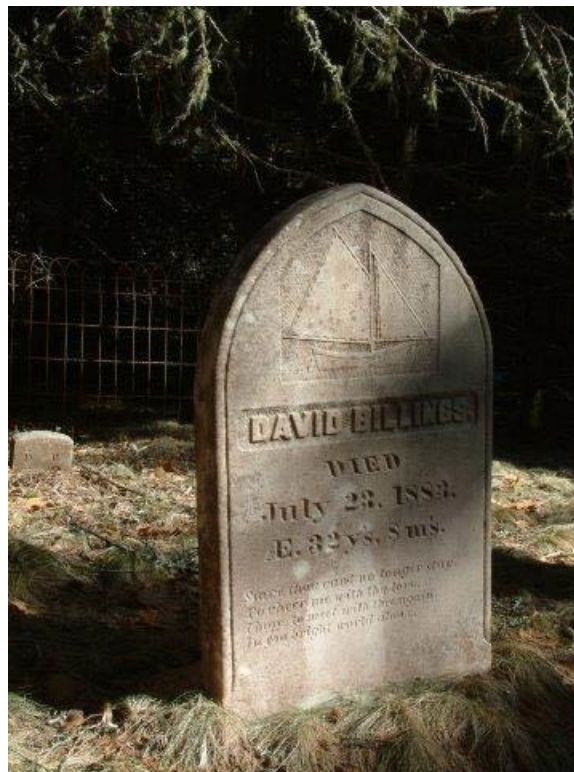
The water seeping out of this hill side has frozen before it can drain away. Over much of Deer Isle the granite forms a surface that makes for considerable run off in torrential rains. That is why we have the buffer zone of our shorelands zoning to maintain a screen of vegetation to help mitigate the effects on our marine environment. That is also why a summer rain may too short and heavy to do much to restore the water table in times of drought.

All along the paths you can see piles of empty spruce cones left by squirrels. Often these piles, called middens, are found on stumps or rocks or on fallen tree trunks, anywhere which offers the squirrel a perch with a good lookout while dining. Middens (below) may represent years of accumulation. Since the squirrels may defend these middens, they might be considered hereditary if they are preferentially passed down to offspring.



The native squirrel on Deer Isle, the red squirrel, is associated with spruce forests. Although many Islanders call them chipmunks, they are actually a different species. You can see a black stripe on the side of a red squirrel, especially on the males during breeding. Chipmunks wear their stripes on their back. As soon as you cross over the bridge to the mainland you can see chipmunks. They are more golden tan colored and have their black stripes on the top of their backs. Another squirrel you may see on our Island these days is the grey squirrel, associated with deciduous forests and suburban areas. They are large and grey. Usually when they move in, over time the red squirrels move out. Have they made their way from the bridge all the way down to Stonington yet?

Where the trail suddenly takes a sharp dogleg turn to the left, a short spur continues straight ahead for a short distance to the Toothaker Family cemetery.



Among the stone carvings here is this handsome sloop. In the front row at far right is the tombstone of Capt. John Toothaker. The family changed their name from Whitaker when they fled England due to religious persecution. See also the memorial stone for his son, Capt. William S. Toothaker, who died of so-called swamp fever, probably malaria, aboard a troop transport ship on the James River, in Virginia, just days before the war ended in 1865, at the age of 37. Mentioned in the PBS program *The Civil War*, by Ken Burns, this young man was one of the 99 men from Deer Isle. You can see Toothaker's records and more about our Civil War soldiers in an exhibit at the Deer Isle-Stonington Historical Society.



Return to that sharp dogleg in the trail and this time follow it to the perimeter of the shore. Do check the smooth polished expanses of rocks for glacial striations as you follow the shoreline. When the great sheets of ice ground across here, the rocks they carried on their undersides scored the land like coarse sandpaper. If you chose the longer loop, you can warm yourself in the reflected heat of the mini-cove nicknamed The Oven. Offshore you may find seals hauled up on Toothacher Ledge. The protected waters here are a good place to find ducks wintering from the Arctic.

You may have noted that the headstones in the little cemetery spell the family name “Toothaker”, which is not as the ledge is spelled on the charts. Many old documents and those descendants in the phone book today all use the “K” spelling. Why the name on the chart is spelled differently may have the same explanation as why the lighthouse off the west of Stonington is called Deer Island Thoroughfare on the charts: some long ago clerk in some city way to the south of us who thought he could spell better than the Islanders?

Return to where you began your visit to the Tennis Preserve. You may have noticed two different signs to the Davis Farm as you passed both ends of a trail that obviously was something of a horseshoe shape. There is another whole section of the Tennis Preserve which is well worth your time. On the southwest of the Tennis Road, the trails loop around what was once the Roswell Davis Farm. The outer regions of this section are an expedition itself, parts of it passing through strangely contorted roots covering the trail.



One loop will take you across a bare granite exposure which looks like a miniature of the vegetation partway up Mount Katahdin. Here on Deer Isle we see that some plants on our shores are also the same as some species at our quarries and other granite outcrops. Small wonder, as it is the lichens that first move in and most readily survive harsh conditions.



The open field that remains from the small farmstead of a century ago is another interesting section to explore.



There is a foundation that indicates where the Davis house (above) was. A fine interpretive sign tells about several generations of the Davis family. Old apple trees, a pear or two and a large lilac offer lovely blooms in late May and early June with azure and tiger swallowtail butterflies likely.



A short walk takes you to Davis Cove where you may hear the clatter of a kingfisher. A few granite blocks remain of the old wharf.



Like most of our early settlers, Davis had to harvest from both the sea and the land to keep his family in food around the calendar year. Since this cove drains at low tide, careful planning must also have been an element of the Davis enterprise.



If you missed finding any eiders on Pickering Cove, you may well find them here in Southeast Harbor. Many winters they seem to enjoy the sheltered coves and the tide rips here.

You have several options of trail loops for returning to your car. All will take you back through the varied habitats by which you can read the history of Deer Isle.

We hope you have enjoyed your outing.



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