

Day Trip

Just Beyond New York's Suburbs, a Genuine Swamp



Norman Y. Lono for The New York Times

Paddling up the east branch of the Croton River in the Great Swamp, a nature refuge east of the Hudson.

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BEAVERS tend to keep to themselves in the Great Swamp, a 20-mile patchwork of rivers, forest, bogs and ponds near the [Connecticut](#) border about 50 miles north of [New York City](#). But canoeing on a river there one day this season, I saw ample evidence of their presence: on one bank, their trademark lodges of mud and sticks, and on the other, silver maples with bark stripped by beaver teeth. Other creatures weren't so shy. A mallard honked overhead. Painted turtles basked on a log in the sun, near banks thick with buttonwood and green ash.



Map: The Great Swamp

Some canoeists and kayakers steer clear of swamps, but those who regularly dip their paddles into the waters of this one are enthusiastic about it as an ecological treasure, a sort of temperate-climate Everglades teeming with a wide variety of species of plants and animals.

From a New Yorker's point of view, the biodiversity also has a practical advantage: the Great Swamp contains the headwaters of the Croton River, which typically supplies about 10 percent of New York City's drinking water, and the more natural it remains, the better. Increasing development near the swamp, which spreads out in Dutchess and Putnam Counties, has the city concerned. But for now a dense wall of wilderness veils this landscape from the outside world.

The isolation also makes the swamp a good place for the kind of unhurried canoe trip that fits nicely into a single afternoon. The east branch of the Croton, where I was canoeing that day, squiggles through the swamp's southern reaches and offers a trip that is beautiful and demands only moderate exertion. The round trip is four miles; three hours allows time to stop and float.

The best place to put in is at a small beach near Green Chimneys (a school that uses animals in giving therapy to children) on Putnam County Route 65, also called Doansburg Road. Rains have supplied enough water this year so that a canoe launched here isn't likely to bottom out, yet not so much as to flood the area. Even yesterday, when the banks of many Northeast rivers were inundated, this site was accessible. Slip the canoe into the water and paddle upstream, to the north, past houses on the riverbanks. Their backyards extend to the river, an illustration of one danger that Jim Utter, a professor of environmental science at Purchase College of the [State University of New York](#), said officials see in waterfront development. When yards come this close, lawn chemicals can run off into the water and endanger its purity, he said.

Mr. Utter is also chairman of Friends of the Great Swamp (or Frogs, as the group's members often call it), a group formed to protect the swamp. The swamp is protected by local, state and federal regulations, but some environmentalists complain that enforcement is lax.

After a few paddle strokes, branches form a canopy above the mossy banks. Quickly, the houses disappear from sight. About a mile from the launch point, the river opens into a wide, football-field-size section that regulars refer to as "the lake," lined by gentle sweeps of tall grasses punctuated by short gnarled trees. Close to its edges, flush with the water's surface, sits what looks like a field of lily pads. Beyond, crooked paths of water splinter out

into thickets bathed in shadows. The water here is the color of root beer, an effect of tannins, brown-tinted sediments released from decomposing wood, Mr. Utter said. WHEN I paddled the route in May, yellow irises provided a touch of color among the black willows in the mud flats, and a woodpecker tapped out its characteristic rhythm in the distance. The scenery seemed to beg for quiet contemplation, which is exactly what Ralph Toscani, who was floating nearby in his banana-colored kayak, said he had come for. Mr. Toscani, who lives in New Milford, Conn., rates the east branch of the Croton as the best paddling destination in two states — a place where he has gotten close enough to birds' nests to watch eggs hatching. "It's really just very meditative," he said. "Plus, it's a lot less expensive than golfing."

Soon the river narrowed again. Most kayakers and canoeists turn back where a massive bleached-white tree lies across the river at about the two-mile mark. Like many other fallen trees in the swamp (those not killed by beavers, anyway), this one probably went down because its roots were undermined by rising water levels and shifting river courses, making it vulnerable to toppling in a strong wind. Other fallen trees sport new growths that look like saplings in miniature, mysteriously emerging from their trunks.

On the way back, a row of low green hills appears on the eastern horizon — foothills of the Taconic Ridge, which stretches all the way to the [Berkshires](#). Though they may not look particularly special today, in the Colonial era these hills were fiercely disputed land in an area called the Oblong, part of a 200-year turf war between New York and Connecticut. The last suit was finally resolved in 1881, making it official that Connecticut owned the panhandle of Fairfield County, including Greenwich, Stamford and Darien, and giving New York the Oblong, a strip two miles wide and 60 miles long on the border of the two states that is now contained mostly in Westchester, Putnam and Dutchess Counties. Early in the fight, New York encouraged settlers to move near the Oblong, and Quakers fleeing hostile treatment in [Massachusetts](#) and Connecticut responded. Quaker Hill, a hamlet at the top of one of the hills, was one of their settlements. It is also the site of the source of the east branch of the Croton, which bubbles up out of the ground at the former home of the Hoags, one of Quaker Hill's founding families.

That's the story as related by James Mandracchia, who runs the Akin Free Library in Quaker Hill, an attractive building with a bulbous green cupola that makes an interesting stop after canoeing. Inside is a quirky collection that includes local minerals, meteorites, Wappinger Indian arrowheads and a Quaker branding iron.

The museum also has bowling pins from the Mizzentop Hotel, which brought Quaker Hill fame a century later as a summer resort. Albert J. Akin, who built it, also built the local library. The hotel was demolished in the 1930's, and the area faded back into obscurity.

Now, after many quiet decades, outdoor lovers are finding the swamp and Quaker Hill — and considering the area a discovery.

"Many people from Poughkeepsie don't even know we're here," Mr. Mandracchia said. "But with all its history and beauty, it's really a hidden paradise."

If You Go

TO reach the put-in spot for canoes near the Green Chimneys school from I-84, take Exit 20 and follow Route 22 north for about three miles. Veer to the right to take Route 65 (Doansburg Road) and drive about a mile. Across the road from the school, drive down a short driveway toward the river (the east branch of the Croton). Although the school lets boaters cross its property, it is private land, and students may be using it, too.

In nearby Beacon, N.Y., you can rent a canoe for \$60 a day, or a kayak for \$45, at [Hudson Valley Pack and Paddle](#) (45 Beekman Street, 845-831-1300; www.hvpackandpaddle.com). You will need a car to haul it to the river; the store staff can tie it to the car.

Information on other access points is available from the Friends of the Great Swamp (845-855-1917; www.frogs-ny.org).

Places to load up on sandwiches before setting out are Augie's Good to Go (157 Main Street, Beacon; 845-831-2082; closed Sundays and Mondays) and Muddy Cup (129 Main Street, Beacon; 845-838-0138), a coffee shop that sells wraps, bagels, cookies and muffins seven days a week.

The Akin Free Library (397 Old Quaker Hill Road in the town of Pawling, 845-855-5099) and its museum are open from 2 to 4 p.m. Thursday through Sunday from May 15 to Oct. 15, or by appointment. To get there from Green Chimneys, go back to Route 22 and follow it north for eight miles. Turn right on Quaker Hill Road to Old Quaker Hill Road, turn right and look for the library about a quarter-mile up the hill on the left.

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