

Cayuga Trails Club explores and preserves region's numerous hiking areas

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by Olivia Hall, Correspondent



Cayuga Trails Club members (left to right) Joe Wertyschyn, Michael 'Bodhi' Rogers and John Andersson take a summer hike along the Finger Lakes Trail in Schuyler County. / ANNA KEETON / PROVIDED

ITHACA — On a recent Saturday in November, a handful of outdoor enthusiasts gathered at the Cornell Plantations. Led by Cayuga Trails Club volunteer Anna Keeton, the group braved the early-morning chill to learn how to use a compass and map to orient themselves in nature.

Keeton, who used these techniques daily in her previous job as a resource management archaeologist, explained how to calculate one's stride, read various map features, properly set up a compass and triangulate one's position based on two points on a map.

“These are really good skills to have when you go to other parts of the state or country,” Keeton said. “Around here, we usually don’t need a compass because the trails are really well marked and maps are kept up to date.”

Such good conditions exist not least because of the work of the Cayuga Trails Club. Since 1962, the CTC’s nearly 200 family and individual members have been creating, preserving and, of course, hiking many of the trails around Tompkins and surrounding counties.

The volunteer organization was founded as a coordinating group for the Finger Lakes Trail, which runs 560 miles from Allegany State Park in the west to the Catskill Mountains in the east and boasts almost 400 additional miles of side and branch trails.

“The club is organized partially for the responsibility of maintaining (100 miles of) that trail and its spurs,” said Carol Mallison, who has been a CTC member for some 15 years.

In addition, volunteers in 1964 established the 8.5-mile Cayuga Trail along the Fall Creek gorge from the Cornell campus into the Town of Dryden.

Two to three times a year, CTC members get together for special projects, such as building lean-tos or a bridge across an area of wetland, or renewing trail blazes. But most of the regular maintenance is completed by dozens of individuals who each adopt several miles of trail and work on them regularly, alone or with friends.

“If nobody cleans the trails, they will revert to their wild state and very quickly become impassible,” CTC vice president David Priester said. “It’s not much fun for most people to have to climb over trees and wade through heavy brush.”

On “his” eight miles of the Cayuga and Finger Lakes Trails, Tom Reimers, who is approaching his 30-year anniversary with the club, keeps the weeds down with loppers, cuts back tree branches, picks up logs from the path and refreshes trail markers.

Pitching in

Sometimes, however, a major blow-down may require the expertise of one of the club’s half a dozen sawyers.

David Priester, for example, took a class authorized by the U.S. Forest Service and got certified to operate a chain saw and remove fallen trees on state and federal land.

“It’s something I recognize that really needs doing,” he said, “and I have the skills to be effective at that.”

Tom Reimers is similarly motivated to pitch in.

“Previously, I did a lot of hiking on the Finger Lakes Trail, and I was starting to feel guilty that I wasn’t helping to maintain it,” he said. “Now it provides a lot of satisfaction to know that I’m contributing to the maintenance of a 560-mile long trail.”

During the club’s official hikes, as well as its snowshoe and cross-country ski outings (CTC volunteers offer some 50 events a year), members enjoy the fruits of their labor. The excursions are open to the public and explore 2- to 15-mile sections of trail.

“This is such a beautiful area,” said Reimers, who organizes excursions a few times a year, including the popular Earth Day hike in April. “The trails go through fantastic places, the forest, long gorges, waterfalls. There are great vistas and places that most people don’t know about.”

Walk, Look and Learn hikes, of about 3 or 4 miles, focus on some of these natural features.

“This series is one of the trademarks of our club,” said Carol Mallison, publicity and WLL chair on the CTC’s executive board. “The idea is to not just go pell-mell from one end to the next but to stop and learn something about the woods. You might have somebody tell you something about trees, flowers, wildlife or historic landmarks.”

For anyone who cannot make it to the CTC hikes or prefers self-guided adventures, the club publishes its “Guide to Hiking Trails of the Finger Lakes Region,” in its 12th edition and available in several local stores.

“We do pretty well selling those books,” Mallison noted. “It’s fun to see how much people are paying attention to getting outside, and it’s one way of measuring our success.”

Another is the club’s record number of members who, in addition to hiking, get together for occasional picnics, meetings and an annual banquet, and keep up to date through a bimonthly newsletter.

“We’re pretty social,” Tom Reimers concluded. “It’s a good organization and a fun group of people to play around with in the woods.”

Cayuga Trails Club

MISSION: To explore, enjoy and preserve wild lands and places of natural beauty and interest through informal study of the natural and historical features of the out-of-doors by walks and related activities.

FOUNDED: 1962

MEMBERSHIP: A total of 191 family and individual memberships

ONLINE: cayugatrails.org