

Inside Outside
By Allen Young

Bearsden Forest, An Athol Treasure
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An experienced hiker, Athol resident Robert Curley, is the creative and enthusiastic person behind a brand-new map and guide to the Bearsden Forest, one of Athol's treasures. This hilly and forested area – about 1,500 acres in all -- is of great value to this community and region. I hiked there with a friend on a recent Saturday and found the full-color guide very helpful.

With this publication, we may see more people making their way to Bearsden for hiking, mountain biking, horseback riding, fishing and hunting. Among the people who already use the Bearsden regularly are individuals trying to maintain a rigorous exercise routine. Indeed, Curley's text on the guide indicates which trails offer the "best cardio workout."

The guide, with photos by Curley, was attractively designed by Mike Ruocco of Orange and printed by Highland Press of Athol. (My father was a printing press operator before he became a chicken farmer, and it seems to be in my blood to appreciate the high-quality workmanship of the folks at Highland Press). The Athol Conservation Commission funded the project and will receive half of the proceeds.

The commission acquired most of Bearsden in the 1960s under the leadership of its first chairman, Robert Lawton. This dense forest includes several hundred more acres of adjoining town and state lands, including the Newton Reservoir watershed and the Millers River Wildlife Management Area.

Primary access is via Bearsden Road, across from Athol Memorial Hospital. On the way, one passes Adams Farm (great view to the west) and the Paige Cabin, which is available for overnight use by individuals and groups. There is an ample parking lot just before a gate. The discontinued road actually goes beyond the gate; in the past it led to the Red Bridge over the railroad tracks (dismantled in the 1950s) and the Lewis Bridge across the Millers River.

Conservation Commission member J.R. Greene made this observation: "The loss of the Lewis Bridge in a 1936 flood was a key factor enabling the creation of a conservation area in Bearsden. If that road had continued as a through route, it would have seen some homes built on the private property (as happened on the dead end Old Keene Road in Athol the past two decades), and the traffic would have made much of the area unsuitable for conservation purposes."

Curley, who has lived in Athol for five years, made the map from a version previously drawn by Greene which in turn was based on the original map drawn by state employee R. Thompson. Creation of the new guide followed trail work such as clearing and blazing. Curley's hiking experience includes a 1985 through hike on the Appalachian Trail, covering more than 2,000 miles from Maine to Georgia.

The Bearsden paths have been divided into forest trails and mountain trails, and the guide indicates a rating (for difficulty) and a code for trail marks. Loops trails are suggested, and the map shows Bearsden users how to get to the river or to other features such as Duck Pond and Lawton Barway. The five hilltops in the forest – Round Top, Little Round Top, Bemis Hill, Observation Hill and Sheep Rock – are featured, with their elevations, access trails and a symbol for observation platforms. Due to tree growth, the views are not what they used to be, but maybe some day volunteer crews will do some needed trimming.

The guide can be purchased for \$3 at Bruce's Browser, North Quabbin Chamber of Commerce and Larry's Meat and Produce in Athol; Trail Head in Orange; and Red Apple Farm in Phillipston.