

The Preservationists' Trails

By CHRISTOPHER BROOKS



Alan S. Orling for The New York Times

KEEPER Paul Zofnass helps maintain Westchester Wilderness Walk.

GETTING away from the trappings of civilization has always been one of hiking's great allures, along with the possibility of a dramatic payoff in wildlife sightings and sweeping views. But keeping the region's hiking areas away from those trappings is often complicated. The one great requirement of hiking is open space, and lots of it, a commodity in ever-decreasing supply across the suburbs.

Throughout the region, residents have either donated undeveloped land to a public trust or joined together to convince local governments that sometimes a parcel of natural beauty is worth saving for its own sake. What follow are suburban hiking areas that were created through the past and present efforts of these preservationists.

WESTCHESTER

As far back as 1983, Paul Zofnass saw the signs of development creeping into the forest abutting his Pound Ridge home. "We observed the typical flags and slash marks that surveyors make, and realized that it wouldn't be long before developers would pick apart the woods," he recalled. Mr. Zofnass, who with his wife, Renee, had fallen in love with the undulating terrain and its many craggy rock outcroppings, felt action needed to be taken to protect the land. "Once it's developed, there's nothing more that can be done," he said.

Mr. Zofnass approached the property owners in his neighborhood and over a decade managed to persuade most of them, including Garry Trudeau and Jane Pauley, to join the Zofnasses in either donating property to the Westchester Land Trust or granting permanent easements. The result of that effort was Westchester Wilderness Walk, a 150-acre parcel that opened in 2000 and now consists of four major loops that allow for nearly six miles of hiking.

"It's laid out through some rugged, rocky areas, and terrific wetlands, so that you get a really varied hiking experience in an area where there are a number of houses, without

ever really seeing a house,” said Tom Andersen, the acting executive director of the Westchester Land Trust.

Deer teem throughout the preserve, which is also home to more than 100 species of mushrooms.

“We had to carve it out from scratch,” Mr. Zofnass said of a trail system that includes steppingstones through a swamp laced with skunk cabbage, and two playful passages directly up roiling streambeds. The south loop consists of a self-guided nature trail, with explanatory labels posted by various trees and geological formations. An east loop passes by an open field, where red-tailed hawks have been known to hunt.

Besides leading the way in founding the preserve, Mr. Zofnass, who is a New York City business consultant to the environmental industry, set up a trust fund to help, in part, maintain the trails. “It’s amazing how tough nature can be on trails and even rocks,” he said.

Westchester Wilderness Walk, where an average of 50 people visit a week, is an unending project for Mr. Zofnass, who is often found — a string of tools attached to his belt — adjusting trail signs among the cedars and oaks.

“That’s part of the fun of it,” he said, noting that he is pursuing an opportunity to add more land to the preserve.

Christopher Brooks is the author (with his wife, Catherine) of “60 Hikes Within 60 Miles: New York City.” The guide’s second edition was published this year.