

Field Notes 2020

Hopkins Forest: The Covid-19 Spring

As it was everywhere, this spring was far from business-as-usual in Hopkins Forest. Just when we were starting our spring field season, waist high in maple sap, and gearing up for class visits and spring clean-up, the normal routine came grinding to a halt. It was certainly different and lonely at times without the clamor of these and other activities that would have typified spring in the forest. Indeed, in a place that exists primarily for education, the lack of students, professors, and caretakers, was eerily palpable.



HMF trails were especially busy this spring

But as is often the case in times of loss, opportunity arose. In my 20 years in this seat, I've never seen the forest so busy with community members, who came out in droves seeking an antidote to the monotony of home quarantine. In spite of the rather gloomy and chilly conditions that prevailed through much of the season, the Hopkins Forest parking area was full and over-flowing with cars much of the time. One Saturday in April, I counted 26 parked vehicles; it looked more like a special event day!

People – locals and those from surrounding states alike -- were flocking to our trails as never before. While many jogged, walked dogs or held protracted conversations, others took the occasion to indulge in the wonders that spring in the woods unveils – seeking out birds, bugs, newts and glimpses of trilliums, trout lilies and foam-flowers. It seemed that for some the forest was aptly serving as a supplement to their remote home-based schooling.

Hopkins Forest was not the same without the spring caretaking crew (featured in Belle Furman's piece) and yes I will greatly miss our cadre of stalwart seniors -- Jared Bathen, Abe Steinberger, Kristen Bayrakdarian, Cristina Mancilla, Brendan Harshberger and Belle (as well as those from previous semesters, including Anna Leitman, Ivy Spiegel Ostrom and Kenneth Marshall). They've all been diligent and loyal through the years and rarely have we retired a cohort like this, all in one, albeit very bizarre, year. Thank you for your vast contributions these past four years and do come back to visit.

In spite of the void brought on by the virus, the flow of spring caretaking went on, albeit at a slower, less frenzied pace. Noah Savage '21 stepped in and, behind his mask, made the maple pans shine (no small task for a crew of one) even amid some rather wintry conditions; then he switched on a dime and got a big start on the annual task of maintaining the 100 plus water-bars that protect our trails. Meanwhile, Alice-Henry Carnell '22, at home in Maryland, began to develop a virtual nature educational program, which will start with a video on how to make "nature bracelets."



Noah Savage '21 hard at work

Stay tuned for more on this initiative. We also bottled the syrup, started in on the garden and installed a concrete base for the evaporator – something we hope will put an end to the seemingly chronic stumbles and spills, and make the 36-year old sugarhouse that much more functional.

So, even amidst the most unprecedented of times, life in the forest goes on, as it waits to resume its role as Williams’ educational outpost.

-Drew Jones

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Marsh marigolds blooming in May