

Blueberry Hill Nature Preserve – – Best Kept Secret

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Behind WorkSafeNB and off the Shannon Road, you can find Grand Bay-Westfield's best kept secret - Blueberry Hill Nature Preserve. From historic farmland to nature preserve, this property tells a fascinating story about dedicated volunteers, as well as corporate sponsors and individual donors who came together to achieve a common vision.

In the early 1800s, settlers built a thriving farm on the property, which is referred to as the "*Old Stevens' Family Farm*". At the time, the property included a farmhouse, fields for cattle to graze, and orchards with pears, plums and apples. The farm had Henderson Brook running through it, as well as river frontage on the St. John River. Over time, the farm became overrun with red ash, mountain ash, speckled alder, and a mature red spruce forest took over the river shoreline. The property eventually ended up in the hands of WorkSafeNB and remained undeveloped for years. As the forest regenerated from farmland, it became a haven for wildlife. If you look closely today, remnants of the farm can still be seen.

The Nature Trust of New Brunswick (NTNB) - a charitable land trust dedicated to conserving areas like Blueberry Hill—recognized the ecological significance of the site and its value to New Brunswickers. In 2008, the NTNB entered into an agreement with WorkSafeNB and the land was transferred to the organization to become a nature preserve. Soon after the transfer, a group of 150 local citizens from the surrounding communities organized themselves as the "*Friends of Blueberry Hill*" to act as stewards of the property, raise funds and work as volunteers to make Blueberry Hill accessible for all.

The first problem encountered by the group was access across Henderson Brook to the other side of the preserve, which was obstructed by two huge rotting culverts. In 2012, an engineering report set out some options to improve access and it was decided to remove the culverts and install a bridge. Road access was built from Shannon Road to the crossing; the banks of the brook were excavated and stabilized and the old culverts were removed. This took

several years to accomplish and would not have been possible without the determination of the Friends of Blueberry Hill and NTNB, as well as many other community partners.

After exploring several bridge designs, the final design was approved in September 2013 and bridge abutments were installed. Blueberry Hill continues to be a fine example of community partnership as various local youth groups assisted in tree planting and landscaping. A local church group provided work crews to develop hiking trails and build benches along the trails and in a clearing overlooking the river.

In November 2013, two long steel beams arrived on site and were placed on the abutments. Lumber was delivered and several volunteers showed up with tools, generators, and enthusiasm to build the bridge. Once word got out about the progress being made on the Blueberry Hill bridge, the community responded. Over several days, volunteers worked in harsh wintery conditions and completed the construction in December 2013. After an engineering inspection, the bridge was ready for public enjoyment.

To celebrate the new bridge and easy access to the beautiful hiking trails at the nature preserve, a grand opening is being planned for spring 2014. In the meantime, Blueberry Hill is open to the public for snowshoeing, hiking, and/or cross country skiing. There are approximately 2 km of trails visible now with more to come. Because of the fragile nature of the site, snowmobilers and ATV operators declared the site off limits, demonstrating awareness and respect in not riding through Blueberry Hill.

NTNB gratefully acknowledges the support of our numerous valued contributors in their efforts to help preserve Blueberry Hill, as well as countless donors who contributed to the stewardship fund in memory of Gary Mittelholtz, whose heart was close to this nature preserve.

It has taken many years and countless hours of volunteer effort to finally achieve access to Blueberry Hill in its entirety. Although it is a nature preserve for the people of New Brunswick, it is located in our back yard and may over time lose its status as our best kept secret. You can get involved in the project by attending the grand opening in the spring or simply enjoy the preserve by sauntering down to Henderson Brook and crossing the bridge. To access the nature

preserve, follow the “blueberry” signs from River Valley Drive to the parking lot on Shannon Road.

See you on The Hill.