State Forests Today

Today, state forests provide more benefits for New York’s citizens than ever before. New York’s forests contribute toward clean air and protect the water quality of countless ponds, wetlands, aquifers, streams and rivers. Many streams once degraded by poor agricultural practices can now, once again, support wild trout populations. Open space for public use and enjoyment is increasingly valuable as private lands are developed and posted. Development in rural areas is causing long-term changes in the landscape. State forests in New York preserve open space and the environmental integrity of undeveloped areas. The management of state forests provides a wide variety of habitat conditions not often found on private lands. State forests offer the kind of large, relatively undisturbed habitat required by many wildlife species. These often include open grassy areas which provide habitat for grassland bird species.
State forests offer opportunities for the kind of recreational activities that are best enjoyed in remote natural areas—activities that typically require a minimum of facility development or site disturbance. Hunting, fishing, trapping, hiking, cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, horseriding and nature observation continue to be popular attractions.

State Forest Highlights

Here are a few highlights of the diverse and exciting activities that await outdoor enthusiasts in Central New York’s 117 state forests:

Exploring Trails
Among the 118 miles of long-distance, lower foot trails to be found in the region’s state forests, James Kennedy State Forest in Cortland offers 1.5 miles of hiking and a part of the Finger Lakes Trail. Similarly, Morgan Hill State Forest, in Cortland and Onondaga counties, offers 10 miles of the Finger Lakes Trail for those who want a full day’s hike.

Loop trails, which are often multi-purpose, are popular with hikers and cross-country skiers. About 95 miles of loop trails are located in the region’s state forests. Oakley Corners State Forest in Tioga County offers 16 miles of loop trails and Bear Swamp State Forest in Cayuga County offers 15 miles.

Destination trails are linear trails that serve as pathways for people to access popular destinations or other points of interest such as natural features. Two popular trails of this type are the Salmon River Falls Unique Area trail (1.5 miles), leading to the Salmon River Falls, and the 0.3-mile trail that leads to Tinker Falls in Labrador Hollow Unique Area. Six trails are designated as horseback-riding trail systems in Central New York’s state forests. The Brookedale Trail System is the largest and most popular and has a total of 150 miles of trails. It is located in Madison County in Charles E. Baker State Forest, Beaver Creek State Forest and Brookedale Railroad State Forest. The Brookedale Trail System is also designated for snowmobiling.

Along with the 150 miles of the Brookdale Trail System, snowmobilers also have more than 70 miles of snowmobile corridor trails; that is, trails that serve as corridors through state forests. Such trails utilize unplowed portions of town roads, public forest access roads, and woodland trails. Most corridor trails are located in state forests in Chenango, Oswego, Cortland and Madison counties.

Cross-country skiing is allowed anywhere on state forests. State forests in the region offer 129 miles of designated trails for cross-country skiing. Stoney Pond State Forest, in Madison County, with 13 miles of trails, is popular with skiers, as is Whapaunaucau State Forest in Chenango County, with another 13 miles.

In recent years, mountain biking has become a popular sport. Several state forest trails are designated for mountain biking and other uses. These include 16 miles in Oakley Corners State Forest, and 12 miles in James Kennedy State Forest, both in Tioga County.

State Forests...a brief history

Reforestation in New York has six roots in the development of the state’s rail and canal systems, as well as the severe impact of the Great Depression on the state’s economy. In the 1800s, it is estimated that 91 percent of New York’s woodlands were cleared for cultivation and pasture by settlers. As a result of farmers began to use rail and canal routes created an easier way for farmers to travel from the poor hilltop farms of Central New York to the vast prairies of the Midwest, which offered better soil and farming conditions. Before leaving, farmers usually cleared all the removable forest products from their land. The Great Depression forced many of the remaining farmers off their land as they searched for some other way to survive.

As more and more farms were abandoned, it became obvious that New York had a serious problem. In response, the New York State Reforestation Law was passed in 1929 and amended in 1931. The main objective of the law and its amendment was to permanently reforest (terraced from agriculture use) and reforest it, providing a wide range of uses from timber to public recreational areas. The program mainly attempted to acquire lands that were at least 50 percent cleared and suitable for reforestation.

Both the State Reforestation Law and the Hewett Amendment of 1931 authorized the Conservation Department, now the Department of Environmental Conservation, to acquire land by gift or purchase for reforestation. These lands had to consist of at least 500 contiguous acres that would forever be devoted to “reforestation and the establishment and maintenance therein of forests for watershed protection, the production of timber, and for recreation and kindred purposes.” These reforestation areas became the nucleus of our present day state forest system.

CCC workers build a ski trail in Central New York

In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in response to the economic hardships of the Great Depression. The CCC was a work relief program for young men who had left school and were not employed.

The CCC also provided the first organized wildlife fire suppression crews. Nationwide, more than 6,000 CCC camps were eventually established. By the time the CCC disbanded in 1942, more than three million men had participated in the program, including 200,000 African Americans.

Since 1942, New York State has been engaged in reforestation projects on public and private land throughout the state and the effect has been profound! New York has gone from about 20 to 25 percent forest cover in 1890, to 62 percent forest cover in 2006.

State Lands in Central New York map and guide

New York State Department of Environmental Conservation

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State Forest Regulations

- Check the forest fire danger level before building a fire. During times of extreme fire danger, campfires are prohibited. If you build a fire, use wood from dead and decaying trees, not from home as it may carry insects or diseases that could infest and kill forest trees. And never leave a fire unattended.

- All motorized vehicles are restricted to access roads posted as motor vehicle trails. Off-road use of motorized vehicles, such as ATVs, trail bikes, and four-wheel drives, is not allowed, except where specifically permitted by signs, posted notice, or DEC permit.

- Camping for more than three nights or in a group of 10 or more requires a permit from a forest ranger. Camping is prohibited within 150 feet of water, roads, or trails.

- No permanent structures should be established, including tree stands or blinds.

- Check for special hunting or trapping regulations before engaging in these activities on state forests. While hunting or trapping, all usual seasonal regulations must be observed. Shooting illegally, illegal use of firearms, illegal processing of game, illegal taking of wildlife, illegal taking of plant materials, illegal off-road vehicle use, littering, and indiscriminate shooting of trees are prohibited.

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