Field Notes:

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RAILWAY

The WW&F Railway was a two-foot gauge railroad that operated from 1894 until 1933. At the height of the business in the early 1900’s, train cars hauled potatoes, poultry, lumber and even the mail. Pressure from cars and trucks began to erode the rail business in the 20’s and eventually the last line of the unique Maine “two-footers” closed in 1943. Train enthusiast Harry Percival founded the WW&F Railway museum in Alna, which builds and maintains tracks and runs old trains along this line south of here.

HAWTHORN

This large hawthorn shrub may not be much fun to climb with its large thorns, but it does provide good cover for wildlife and late fall fruits that many birds and mammals use for food. The long thorns protect the twigs from browsing animals like deer. Hawthorns grow best where there is plenty of sunlight or where there used to be more open canopy.

HILL HISTORY

Imagine what it may have been like here 50 years ago, when the Peaslees owned the farmhouse (now gone). This hill was part of pastureland and at one time was open and treeless. Maxine would watch and listen for her mother calling from the farmhouse below! As you walk the trail along the ridge, look for evidence of past land use. Large mature pines in the overstory along with mature black cherry and white birch are good clues. Also, keep an eye out for the tree species that gave the Town of Alna its name, the speckled alder (Alnus incana).

WILDLIFE BUFFET

Another sign that this was once farmland, these “wild apples” are remnants from past orchards or have grown where squirrels or birds deposited their seeds long ago. Look for turkeys and other wildlife feasting on the apples that are an important resource in an otherwise mature forest.

GLACIAL REMNANTS

Here you’ll notice the deeply cut stream carving its way down the hillside, taking soft clays and sand towards the brook after a heavy rain. These soft sediments are left over from long ago glaciers that once covered Maine (15,000 years ago), a time when the sea level extended as far north as Waterville! As glaciers receded and ocean levels rose then fell, the light sediments were left behind. Look for spotted salamanders that love the soft sediments along the stream as well as other signs of wildlife. Raccoon and mink tracks (raccoons have longer feet and toes) can often be found in the soft clays as these animals search for insects and other invertebrates along the stream channels.

RASPBERRY PERCH

Can you find the raspberry plant here? Look up into the branch of the pine in front of you. This tree is called a “wolf” pine; larger and older than the surrounding trees with many spreading branches from a time when it had room to grow in the open. They are important nest and perch sites. Many birds and mammals feed on raspberries and other fruits. Perhaps the fruit was carried during an earlier time when this forest was more open pasture land. Or perhaps a bird carried it from further afield.

CHRISTMAS FERN

Look in cool damp places along the seeps and streams for evergreen Christmas fern. This fern stays green all winter and continues to photosynthesize even under the snow. Spores are produced on small pinnules.

LUNG LICHEN

This leafy green growth is not a plant but actually a lichen—a complex life form that is a symbiotic partnership of two separate organisms: a fungus and an alga. Lung lichen grows on mature trees above the forest floor and is very slow growing. Look for it along the trail and see what other habitats you find it in.

AMERICAN HORNBEAM

Notice the gray smooth bark with rippled texture, like muscle sinews! The wood is hard and they are frequently found along the banks of rivers and streams, especially where soils have been deposited over time. In summer, look for the beautiful flowers near the tips of the twigs. Also look for Eastern hemlock along the brook that have tannins in the bark, once used to tan leather!

NATURE’S ENGINEERS

From this high point look between the trees to the brook below. At one time the beavers blocked up Trout Brook here and flooded this wide level area. Taking advantage of the deeper water, they fed on the speckled alder and other woody shrubs and trees along the brook. Perhaps they moved on for better food sources, or perhaps during one spring ice out the dam was washed away. Did you know that beavers are the largest rodent in Maine and that their teeth grow continuously their entire lives?