
Shinnecock Hills Preserve

A narrow wedge of open space just north of the Southampton College campus, the 26-acre Shinnecock Hills Preserve is nestled between the LIRR, County Road 39, and St. Andrews Road. Once part of the Shinnecock Golf Club (located directly across C.R. 39 from the Preserve), it was purchased in 1994 by The Nature Conservancy as an excellent example of the rare ecological community known as a “maritime grassland.”

As defined in the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation publication *Ecological Communities of New York State*, this grassland community occurs on the glaciated portion of the Atlantic coastal plain near the ocean and within the influence of offshore winds and salt spray. Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), common hairgrass (*Deschampsia flexuosa*), and poverty-grass (*Danthonia spicata*) are the dominant grasses. As is the case at the Shinnecock Hills Preserve, this community often intergrades, or occurs together in a mosaic pattern, with the “maritime heathland” community, dominated by shrubs such as bearberry, beach heather, lowbush blueberry, huckleberry, bayberry, and beach plum.

Once covering extensive areas of the Shinnecock Hills, Montauk, Block Island, Cape Cod, and the offshore islands in Massachusetts, this plant community is now among the most threatened natural communities in the East. Today, New York’s remnant maritime grasslands total less than 150 acres and are being lost even on “preserved” lands. Time, and a process called “ecological succession,” have greatly altered the grassland landscape both here and in Montauk, to one of woody shrubs and trees. Pitch pine, red cedar, oak, and black cherry are forming ever-widening groves at the Shinnecock Hills Preserve, and seem to indicate that something other than wind and salt spray are necessary for the long-term survival and competitive edge of the grassland community.

In the September–October 1996 issue of the Long Island Botanical Society Newsletter, Ann F. Johnson attempts to document this process of ecological succession in the Shinnecock Hills in her article “The Shinnecock Hills: From Drifting Dunes To Pine Forest in 160 Years.” By examining historical accounts dating back to the early 1800s, coastal and geodetic survey maps, and aerial photographs, Ms. Johnson pieces together the changes in the landscape and concludes that succession proceeded from bare sand to

Shinnecock Hills Preserve

grassy heath between 1822 and 1897, and from grassy heath to pitch pine forest between 1897 and 1983. She ends with the question: “Will the Hills remain in pine forest, or will this in turn be superseded by oaks?” Something to ponder as you amble through the Preserve.

From the Preserve entrance, follow the yellow and green trail markers onto a narrow footpath which climbs steeply through an area of woody shrubs and scattered mature eastern red cedar, oaks and pitch pine. Approximately halfway up the hill (1), the trail passes through a very large and dense patch of trailing arbutus. Most hikers associate this prostrate evergreen with the edges of old woodland roads and trails, clinging to the thin boundary between the unvegetated, compacted soils of the path and the undisturbed adjacent forest. In such places, it forms narrow ribbons of green unlike the broad expanses found here. This fact was noted by botanist Willard N. Clute in his 1899 article “Spring in the Shinnecock Hills”: “most interesting was the Arbutus (*Epigea*), which here almost covered some of the open places, in full sun. The Wintergreen (*Gaultheria*), was also plentiful with the Arbutus, and both seemed decidedly out of place, since they usually occur in woods or at least thickets.”

Further along the trail passes through a waist-high, stout-twigged thicket of beach plum shrubs (*Prunus maritima*) (2). The trail soon veers left, levels off and contours along the side of the hill, skirting a large swath of catbriar on the downhill side (3) before emerging from the scattered trees and thickets and offering the first view over the grasslands. Here the trail forks: follow the arrow directing you to the right, up onto a ridge just below the high point of the preserve. From this vantage point you can view the mosaic of grasses, shrubs, and trees which comprise the preserve today. In order to maintain the grass portions, Nature Conservancy staff have been cutting down pitch pine, eastern red cedar, and black cherry trees as evidenced by the remaining stumps at 4.

Dropping down off the ridge, the trail cuts through an unnatural rectangular-shaped pit (5) largely vegetated with a reindeer lichen (*Cladonia* spp.). This appears to be one of the sand traps associated with the golf fairways constructed here many years ago. According to Elliot Vose, president of the Shinnecock Hills Golf Club, most of the Club’s original fairways were located south of what is now Route 27 (C.R. 39). The golf course was rearranged in the 1930s with the construction of the highway, and all fairways were relocated on the north side of the new road, where the original clubhouse was situated.

Shinnecock Hills Preserve

Once abandoned, the bare, sterile sand found in the trap was the perfect habitat for *Cladonia* to colonize. Based on Willard Clute's observations from 1899, *Cladonia* may have been much more prevalent in this area than it is today. He reported that "in spite of all these adverse conditions, a considerable number of plants manage to exist in the sterile soil. Foremost among them must be placed the reindeer moss (*Cladonia*). When the sun shines, its existence seems to stand still. It crunches under the foot like crusted snow. But a day of moist air revives it, and it becomes soft, pliant and full of life."

Clute also reported that prickly pear (*Opuntia*) could often be found growing in amongst the *Cladonia*. Although I may have missed a few specimens, I was not able to locate any of the former, our native cactus, anywhere along the trail. It appears that this species is another victim of time, change, and ecological succession.

At 6, the trail winds through a small grove of evergreens: red cedar, pitch pine, and a non-native pine with two needles per fascicle and numerous cones quite a bit smaller than those of the nearby pitch pine. My guess is Scotch pine (*Pinus sylvestris*). As I stood examining the buds and unopened yearling cones on a warm sunny afternoon, I could actually hear the snap and crackle of the cones beginning to open to shed their seeds.

Just before reaching a small wooden footbridge, the trail passes close by two more old sand traps, one on the left and the other on the right. Beach heather (*Hudsonia tomentosa*) can be found in both. The footbridge spans a steep-sided ditch which runs straight through the entire preserve. I was not able to find any information on the purpose or origin of the ditch. After the bridge, the trail begins to swing north for the return loop. At 7, you will find a variety of woody shrubs, including both species of *Lyonia* (staggerbush, *L. mariana* and male-berry, *L. ligustrina*) and many good examples of the maritime heathland community such as bayberry, winged sumac, huckleberry, lowbush blueberry, and beach plum. Two key members of this community seem to have greatly diminished in numbers in the area: bearberry (I did find some on the dirt road just below the preserve's high point) and beach heather (*Hudsonia tomentosa*). Both of these were reported as quite abundant in earlier (1800s) botanical accounts of the Shinnecock Hills.

The trail next descends into a depression (8) that marks the lowest elevation in the preserve (44 feet above mean sea level, or AMSL). Here I was finally able to locate several shadbush (*Amelanchier*) specimens: three distinct clumps reaching approximately ten feet in height. I'm not sure if these are the rare Nantucket shads, or our more common *Amelanchier canadensis*.

Shinnecock Hills Preserve

According to Southampton Town Chief Environmental Analyst Marty Shea, the Nantucket shadbush is much smaller in size.

With regard to the issue of whether the dwarf form is actually a separate species from the ubiquitous *A. canadensis*, or that it is merely an expression of environmental conditions, there is much debate. Veteran landscaper and nurseryman Charlie Whitmore was skeptical with regards to the separate species idea, being of the opinion that size reflected a particular site's growing conditions. George W. D. Symonds, author of *The Shrub Identification Book*, has this to say about *Amelanchier*: "This is a large and confusing genus; there is considerable difference of opinion regarding the various species." I'll give the final word to noted botanist Robert Zaremba of The Nature Conservancy, who writes: "A part of the taxonomic confusion of the Rose family, Nantucket Shadbush has not been listed as endangered because it may be a distinctive hybrid."

Before climbing back out of this protected swale, look for the young hickory growing near the bottom, the only hickory specimen I noticed along the trail.

Just beyond a point where the trail crests a knoll, it passes through a clearing dotted with half-inch stumps (9). This area was cleared of sumac in 1999 to allow for the expansion of the maritime grassland community: a form of reverse succession to provide a stage for the early successional grasses to thrive.

The trail next enters a pine and cedar grove (10) and skirts a depression on the left. Here again you will find Scotch pine in the mix. Further along (11), some older, large pitch pines show signs of past fire on their blackened trunks. The unmarked fork in the trail there is confusing; the main trail to the right leads out to St. Andrews Road. Look to the left and head uphill towards the trail signpost. At the intersection near the ditch, backtrack to the parking area. Consider continuing straight ahead onto the high point (101 feet AMSL) where a view of Peconic Bay can be had to the northwest. Note the flat-topped, level pitch of the knoll and the rich soil—this may have been one of the old golf course greens. An old roadway leads off the knoll and back to the trailhead area, traversing through a large patch of bearberry enroute.

While offering a pleasant walk at any time of the year, the best time to visit the Shinnecock Hills preserve is in late spring (May and early June) when the shrubs (shadbush and beach plum) and the wildflowers (bird's-foot violet, lupine and bushy rockrose (*Helianthemum dumosum*)) are in bloom. The latter is described by Robert Zaremba of The Nature Conservancy as

Shinnecock Hills Preserve

“perhaps the signature species for the maritime grassland community.” Before planning a visit, consider contacting the South Fork Chapter of The Nature Conservancy (631-329-7689) to see if they are scheduling a guided tour of this interesting preserve.

Directions: The entrance to this Nature Conservancy preserve is located on St. Andrews Road, which intersects C.R. 39 (Rte. 27) just west of the Southampton College exit (the traffic light at Tuckahoe Road). Please be aware that this section of Rte. 27 is extremely dangerous, with traffic often moving very fast through the curves on either side of St. Andrews. Once safely on St. Andrews, look for the parking area and trailhead on the left, approximately 0.3 mile from C.R. 39.

