Tuckahoe Hill Preserve

Despite its close proximity to the highly congested, strip-mall style development of County Road 39, Tuckahoe Hill offers the hiker a wonderful escape into a diverse and interesting forest. In the late 1980s, with the help of local resident Kurt Billings, Group for the South Fork led an effort to interest the town and county in preserving the 200-acre woodland that covers the hill. Our arguments for preservation included protecting one of the Suffolk County Water Authority well fields that supplied public water to Southampton Village; preserving wildlife habitat, including that of several rare species; and providing a corridor for the Paumanok Path that included one of the most magnificent views on the South Fork. As of early 2003, 140 acres have been preserved.

In addition to the ubiquitous oak–hickory forest, Tuckahoe Hill has stands of red maple, tupelo, pitch pine, and American beech, and quite a few survivors of the chestnut blight which continue to resprout from roots systems that are over one hundred years old. The many perched freshwater wetlands found in the area add to the forest's diversity, enabling it to support a wide variety of amphibians such as spotted salamanders, spring peepers, spadefoot and Fowlers toads, and gray tree frogs and wood frogs, in addition to the usual woodland inhabitants: red fox, white-tail deer, box turtles, milk snakes, red-tailed hawks, and great-horned owls.

The 127-foot-high section of glacial deposits known as Tuckahoe Hill is somewhat isolated from the rest of the east–west trending Ronkonkoma moraine. Topographic maps of the area reveal low-lying lands on its east and west flanks which are part of several distinct north–south troughs. One connects North Sea Harbor, Little Fresh Pond, and Agawam Lake, the other connects North Sea Harbor, Big Fresh Pond, and Heady Creek, at the east end of Shinnecock Bay. According to the 1957 U.S. Geological Survey for this area, these north–south trending channels developed as a result of rivers of glacial meltwater carving through the morainal deposits between the slowly receding glacier to the north and the Atlantic Ocean to the south.

The trail entrance is on Sebonac Road, directly across from Tuckahoe School, and adjacent to the stop sign at the North Magee Street intersection (1). The narrow, recently cut footpath winds through a mature oak and hickory forest, skirting a large swamp off to the right. Many of the understory

shrubs are sweet pepperbush and swamp azalea, head high woody plants often found in or adjacent to wetlands.

Within a few hundred feet the footpath joins a fairly wide, unpaved road (2) whose sandy roadbed is a good place to look for animal tracks. Deer, fox, and raccoon imprints are often discernible, even to the novice tracker. After a short distance, you may notice a few wetland plants growing along both sides of the road: tupelo and red maple trees, and sweet pepperbush and highbush blueberry shrubs (3). In the winter months, with most of the leaves gone, the low areas of both wetlands are fairly visible. Clumps of Tussock sedge can be seen in the bottom of the wetland off to the left, while the one on the right is dominated by old tires.

Termed "vernal" wetlands, these low-lying areas usually have standing water in them early in the year from winter and spring precipitation, but are often dry in the summer months. The temporary nature and small size of these wetlands has been a huge liability for them: many people, including generally conservation-minded sportsmen, do not see the value of wetlands that support neither gamefish or waterfowl. Fortunately, the South Fork has local ordinances that do, as both these wetlands are the haunts of a variety of unusual amphibians, including some of our beautiful and rare mole salamanders.

As the road gradually steepens and comes within sight of a large wood and brush pile, look for a foot trail on the left (4). Although it is a well-worn and quite visible path, it is easily missed.

According to William Wallace Tooker's book on Indian names, Tuckahoe has several possible meanings. His best guess is that it is the Shinnecock name for *Arisaema triphyllum*, commonly called jack-in-the-pulpit or Indian turnip and quite abundant in the damp soils of the Tuckahoe and North Sea area. While the name "Indian turnip" suggests it is a wild edible, this may be a case of a misleading common name. It and a close relative, skunk cabbage, are riddled with calcium oxalate crystals which cause a severe burning sensation in the mouth. The crystals may be a built-in defense against browsing. In any case, the turnip needs to be repeatedly boiled and strained in order to purge the crystal, a process that uses more energy in preparation than is gained in eating.

At the first trail intersection (5), note the abundant swamp azaleas (*Rhododendron viscosum*) growing along both sides of the trail. Although normally found in wet soils at the edge of swamps, marshes, and freshwater ponds, here it is thriving in dry sandy soil quite a distance uphill from the kettlehole wetland off to the left (west).

Continue straight (north) and look for several American chestnut trees close to the trail at and before the next intersection (6). American chestnut (*Castanea dentata*) was once one of the most common forest trees throughout much of its range, accounting for a third to half of the canopy species. Not only was it common, but it grew fast and lived long, the latter a reflection of its status as the most rot-resistant of our native trees. All that changed quite quickly and dramatically beginning in 1890 when nursery stock from China infected with the Asian fungus *Cryphonectria parasitica* was brought into New York City. Spreading at a rate of up to fifty miles per year, 99.9% of all chestnut canopy trees in North America were dead by 1950.

For some reason, the mature canopy trees initially infected by the fungus were not able to regenerate by root sprouts. However, their offspring, trees grown from nuts produced before the magnificent canopy specimens succumbed to the blight, could stump-sprout after attack by the fungus. The vast majority of today's multiple-trunked understory chestnuts arise from root systems established by nuts which germinated at the onset of the blight.

While this allows the American chestnut to survive as a member of the forest community here, the fungus kills the above-ground portion of the tree before it reaches an age where it can produce fertile nuts. This fact severely reduces the American chestnut's stature and role in today's forest community.

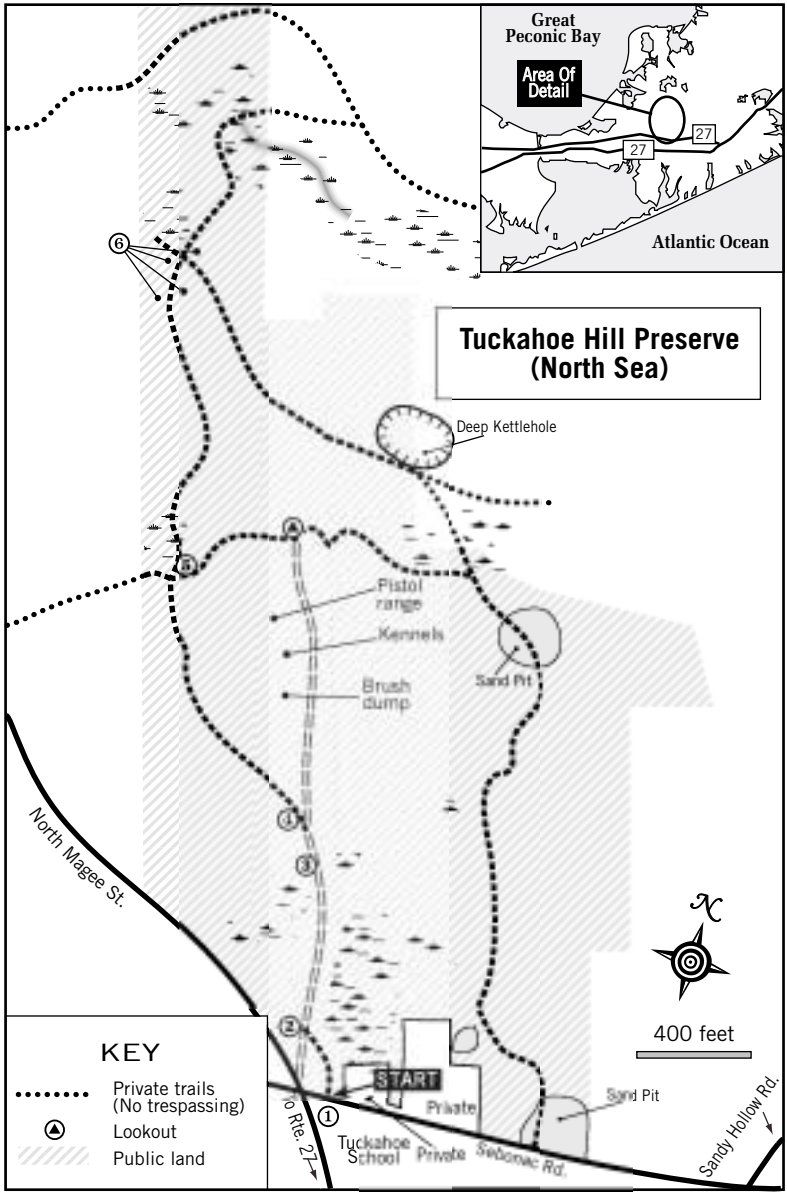
We are waiting for a few more public acquisitions in the Tuckahoe Hill area before designing a better trail loop; for the time being you will have to backtrack to (5). Turn left there and follow alongside some snow fencing into a slight depression, then up to the top of Tuckahoe Hill, owned by Southampton Village. As you climb you may notice that the size—both height and girth—of the oak trees along the trail diminishes dramatically. This phenomenon is very common all along the South Fork moraine, particularly on the northern slopes. The strong northerly winds and porous, dry soils near the morainal ridge combine to stunt the growth of the typical assortment of oaks and hickories which, further downhill, grow much larger. This process mimics, in some ways, the better-known "krummholz" phenomenon in the mountains of New England.

Someone recently cleared many of the oaks growing on the north side of the summit, probably to enhance the panoramic view: one of the best on the South Fork. Slivers of water on either side of Cow Neck mark Little and Great Peconic Bays; the sandy bluffs of Robins Island and the North Fork are also clearly visible. The only obvious structure in the 180-degree view is the barn and silo on Cow Neck.

As an alternative to cutting down trees, perhaps a small observation tower, five or six feet high, would suffice; it could be constructed over the concrete foundation of the old World War II lookout station, which was located at the hill's highest point.

To return to the trailhead, simply follow the roadway on the south side of the hill: a direct and quick route back, passing the Village police pistol range, a storage area for dead street trees (some nice firewood there), and an abandoned dog kennel.

Directions: Situated north of Route 27 (a.k.a. County Road 39) between Southampton College and Southampton Village, Tuckahoe Hill is bounded on the west by North Magee Street, on the east by Sandy Hollow Road, on the north by West Neck Road, and on the south by Sebonac Road. The trailhead is located in the northeast corner of the intersection of Sebonac Road and North Magee Street, directly across from Tuckahoe School.


Great
Peconic Bay
Area Of
Detail
27
27
Atlantic Ocean
Tuckahoe Hill Preserve
(North Sea)
Deep Kettlehole
Pistol
range
Kennels
Brush
dump
Sand Pit
North Magee St.
400 feet
KEY
Private trails
(No trespassing)
Lookout
Public land
START
Private
Sand Pit
To Rte. 27
Tuckahoe
School
Private
Sandy Hollow Rd.