

Turner Hill Wildlife Management Area

General Description

Turner Hill Wildlife Management Area (WMA) is located in southeastern Vermont, in the towns of Athens and Grafton. The state of Vermont owns 595 acres on what is known as the Athens Dome, a geologic feature resulting in a high-elevation plateau. Turner Hill WMA, while relatively flat once you are on it, is located atop steep hills which make access difficult from all sides. The WMA does abut the Townsend/Grafton Road in one location but the land slopes up very steeply there. The best access is at the end of Turner Hill Road on the northern end of the WMA. The road climbs steeply and is not plowed in the winter.

History

The first parcel was acquired in 2011 from The Nature Conservancy (TNC) after the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department (VFWD) and TNC collaborated on a competitive grant from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to protect habitat for the federally-endangered Northeastern bulrush. The grant enabled the VFWD to acquire three separate parcels between 2011 and 2013 totaling 595 acres to protect Northeastern bulrush wetland habitat. Additional funding was provided by Vermont State Duck Stamp funds. The funding was leveraged by a donation of land from Vermont Electric Power Company (VELCO).

While working on the conservation of the properties, the VFWD identified highly significant cultural resources related to the heritage of African Americans in Vermont. Alexander and Sally Turner were slaves who escaped captivity in Virginia, moved to Vermont and established the Turner Farmstead following the end of the Civil War. One of their daughters, Daisy Turner (1883-1988), was a well-known orator and folk teller whose stories and songs of African American heritage were extensively documented by the Vermont Folklife Center. Cultural resources related to the Turner homestead include one standing building known as Birchdale Camp; historical archeological remains of the original Turner house; and associated outbuildings; wells, and other cultural features and the surrounding landscape related to the Turner family's use of the property.

Habitat Features

Turner Hill WMA is comprised of numerous beaver-influenced wetlands, the habitat for Northeastern bulrush. In the course of monitoring the Northeastern bulrush it has become evident that populations in individual wetlands seldom persist for more than a few years. Eventually the bulrush is outcompeted by other wetland plants and declines or disappears altogether. When a wetland is flooded due to beaver activity, then begins to draw down again after the beavers leave due to lack of food, the bulrush reappears and thrives for a number of years before the cycle begins anew. In extensive wetland complexes, like the one on Turner Hill WMA, various sub-populations of Northeastern bulrush occur at different stages of the cycle ensuring their long term persistence at the site. Numerous vernal pools contribute to the wetland diversity, nested in a diverse forest with mast producing trees such as American beech, black cherry, and red oak.

Common Fish and Wildlife

Mammals: Common mammals on the WMA include black bear and moose. Furbearers include otter, beaver, muskrat, coyote, red and gray fox.

Birds: Wood ducks, Canada geese, hooded mergansers and mallards find excellent habitat here, along with other wetland species such as great blue heron and bitterns. Game birds include ruffed grouse, wild turkey and American woodcock. There is also a full compliment of songbirds such as winter wren and black throated green warbler.

Reptiles and Amphibians: Blue-spotted, spotted, red-backed, and northern two-lined salamanders and eastern (red-spotted) newt have been documented. Green, pickerel, northern leopard, wood frogs, gray tree and bullfrogs may be found along with spring peepers. Turtle species may include snapping and painted. Milk, northern water, and garter snakes may be present.

Fish: If the water is cold enough, and the conditions are right, beaver ponds can be great habitat for trout, but the habitat is ephemeral. Over time the ponds can become too warm to support trout. The conditions may not be suitable again for many decades.

Turner Hill WMA is open to regulated hunting, trapping, fishing, hiking, and wildlife viewing.