



NATURE

A PIECE OF QUIET

East Haddam's Nichols Field Trails, Pickerel Lake Shouldn't Be Missed





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I used to chuckle at phone calls or emails from readers who read my column and confessed that, for years, they had driven past something, not realizing it was there.

Now it's my turn. For eight years I lived in the Moodus section of East Haddam. For eight years I went to the transfer station several times a week. And for eight years I missed the trails from Nichols Field — the Nichols Field I thought was just a sports complex with a baseball field, a basketball court and a playground.

But Nichols Field is a wind-swept peninsula jutting out into picturesque Pickerel Lake, its moss-covered ledges looming next to trails that twist through fields of ferns. Nichols is a place where trails wind along the banks of the Moodus Reservoir and dragonflies float on water lilies. It's not a place to miss for eight years.

There are several parking areas to access the 120-acre property in the northern portion of town near the Colchester border, including one — ahem — on the road to the transfer station. A trail marked with blue blazes takes visitors along the banks of Pickerel Lake Brook, one of the state's shortest waterways, running only about a mile from the man-made Pickerel Lake in Colchester to the man-made Moodus Reservoir.

Both bodies of water helped to power cotton mills along the Moodus River in the 1800s. "During the dog days, the river would dry to a mere trickle and production ceased. All prayed for rain," wrote Bruce R.

Sievers in his book "Mills Along The River." But Pickerel Lake's dam leaked all the time and its storage capacity lasted only about a week, so eventually it was abandoned.

The blue trail meets up with an old woods road that takes visitors to that dam and to a bench overlooking the Pickerel Lake, its eastern shores developed with cottages while its western banks still retain the wild and rugged look of some northern forest lake.

A little bushwhacking is required to get out to the end of the peninsula, but it's worth the effort, especially when the wind is blowing, kicking up whitecaps on the surface of the lake and swaying the trees along the shoreline.

From the old woods road, visitors can pick up a red-blazed trail that travels along the northern boundaries of the property, through fern-filled forests. Although the trail can be hard to follow at times, the area is popular enough that a path of crushed ferns leads the way to the next blaze. The trails can be a bit soggy, so visitors should wear waterproof footwear.

My favorite trail is an orange-blazed path that travels right along the banks of a finger of the Moodus Reservoir. The surface is covered with water lilies about to do their annual bursting into flower. There are several viewing areas across the reservoir as well as picnic tables — including one looking like an island in a sea of ferns — and benches scattered about to enjoy the solitude.

The trails off Nichols Field are worth visiting. Don't feel bad if you've been driving past them for years — even those of us who have been exploring the hidden and not-so-hidden places across the state for years miss a few in our own backyards.

► Parking is available at the transfer station along Nichols Road off Route 149 and across from Mott Lane, as well as an area just to the west of the transfer station along Route 149.

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LUSH LANDSCAPES of ferns and running water spring up along the trail system through Nichols Park in East Haddam.