

**ON
THE
WILD
SIDE**



By J. Gordon Douglas

Adventures skiing the Great Swamp River

I joined the Putnam County Land Trust's cross-country skiing outing on Sunday morning, Feb. 16.

When I came down to breakfast that morning the outdoor thermometer seemed to read 37 degrees Fahrenheit. That would have been decidedly warmer than the night before.

I blinked and saw the dot between the numbers. It was 3.7 degrees above zero. In the middle of the night it had been as low as minus nine degrees.

As soon as I finished my oatmeal, I started carefully putting on every article of warm clothing I could find.

Thick mountaineering wool socks came out of the bottom of a drawer. A colorful Afghan hat with a roll of wool to cover the ears came from the back of a top shelf. For warm hands I chose Ice-fisherman's convertible glove/mittens, from the Angler's Den.

For the upper body I donned three layers of wool shirting over a polypropylene undershirt all with excellent wicking properties to safeguard against hypothermia.

Finally came my recent purchases from the Ski Haus – boots, ski pants, and skis and poles.

I also took a digital camera – a mistake, as they do not function in very cold weather.

Thus armed against the cold, I drove off to meet outdoor enthusiast Rick Saracelli at his house in Patterson. He had urged me to come and was to be my guide, my Virgil, when we entered a frigid but beautiful world that the good Lord had surely not created for man's recreation.

The Nature Conservancy has a plan for planned nature out-



Illustration by Jean Hannon Douglas

an average of two feet. Even the mud below, usually never frozen, was solid.

Skiing from our cars to the river, Rick pointed out the 60-acre "Wolgast" property that is in the process of being acquired for the Town of Patterson under the Federal Grant that Friends of the Great Swamp and affiliated organizations won last summer.

This property is like a low island, as much of it is slightly above the level of the Swamp. When added to the 20-acre present Patterson Environmental Park, our community will have preserved a critical and magnificent Great Swamp area of over 80 acres.

Just before the River we turned south and, at a good clip, headed for Pine Island, the very heart of the Great Swamp.

The cliffs of Pine Island on its east side rise sharply a little ways from the river. Pine Island must be constituted of very hard rock, as the glaciers of the ice age did not level it.

While the rest of our group decided to circumnavigate Pine Island, Rick and I continued straight down the river, which afforded better skiing conditions.

Rick pointed out to me a watermark circle 18 inches above the ice on a large tree. This high watermark had been made earlier in

away from under it.

It was this thin ice at the edge of the river that Rick's dog, Luna, fell through on an earlier outing, as I will relate in a future "On the Wild Side" column.

Rick pointed out how the two-foot thick ice in the middle of the river was dipping down in the middle, as the water level under it lowered. Ice is flexible – to a point. If the water lowers further, he said, we will see stress cracks marking the middle of the river.

Rick and I skied past three beaver dams constructed last summer, now covered with snow. Then we came to the hole where Luna had fallen through the ice and Rick had gotten soaked in the icy water coming to her rescue.

The hole had iced over in the extreme cold, but still was an ominous black area in an entirely white scene.

We were now past the Watchtower property and needed to head back so as to rejoin the rest of our group.

Despite the cold, I had broken a sweat trying to keep up with Rick, an expert cross-country skier. Off came the multi-colored, super warm Afghan hat.

We were soon back at the parking area and Rick drove me to his house, near Patterson's historic little red schoolhouse, where I'd

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The Nature Conservancy has a slogan for planned nature outings that encounter rigorous or inclement weather. It is "Many sign up, but few show up."

Of the more than 20 who called the Land Trust planning to come, only 10 of us showed up to challenge the frigid temperature.

When we arrived at the Patterson Environmental Park, we found that the long preceding stretch of sub-freezing weather had frozen the Swamp River for

an average of two feet. Even the mud below, usually never frozen, was solid.

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Rick pointed out to me a watermark circle 18 inches above the ice on a large tree. This high watermark had been made earlier in the winter when we had an inordinate amount of rain.

This rainy period was followed by the long cold snap that we are still in as I write this column.

After the rain abated, the water level dropped as the water receded back towards the river in the middle of the Great Swamp.

Ice thickened in the river as the cold spell continued, but ice away from the center of the swamp remained thin as the water receded

away from under it.

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Virgil led Dante into the fearful underworld. Rick had taken me into the otherworldly wintry Great Swamp. It was a wonderful trip and I recommend it to anyone who enjoys cross-country skiing, or wants to learn. It had been my second time on cross-country skis and I look forward to going out again.

(J. Gordon Douglas is a resident of Pawling.)

Illustration by Jean Hannon Douglas

