

Lyme's Pleasant Valley Preserve: Pretty as a picture



An overlook at Lyme's Pleasant Valley Preserve offers a view of Mount Archer. Photo by Betsy Graham

Published July 16, 2020 1:37PM

By **Steve Fagin** The DAY Newspaper

Trees, trees and more trees.

From an overlook in Lyme's 235-acre Pleasant Valley Preserve, that's all you can see — a lush, green canopy that extends more than a mile southwest to a forested summit at the 275-acre Mount Archer Woods preserve. Just northwest of Mount Archer, the Eno Preserve spreads out over 101 wooded acres alongside the 18-acre Pickwick conservation easement; the 435-acre Jewett Preserve lies due west.

Few places in southeastern Connecticut offer such an expansive view of land permanently protected from development. Better yet, these five properties, collectively totaling more than 1,200 acres and known as the Ridgetop to River Preserves, are connected by more than 12 miles of trails. In short, they are a hiker's paradise, as our small group discovered the other day.

"Amazing place!" exclaimed Maggie Jones, director emeritus of the Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center in Mystic, as she gazed from our elevated vantage point.

The Pleasant Valley Preserve draws its name from the area made famous by artists who were an integral part of the American Impressionist movement. During a period of more than 30 years at the start of the 20th century, some 200 artists lived and painted nearby in Old Lyme's Florence Griswold House, now a museum and national historic landmark.

Among the members of this colony was Oscar Fehrer, a portrait and landscape artist who studied in New York, Munich and Paris before moving to Lyme in 1918 to establish a summer home for his family. Thirty-four years after his death in 1958, his daughters, Catherine and Elizabeth Fehrer, donated 235 acres to The Nature Conservancy for the Pleasant Valley Preserve, abutting a 105-acre conservation easement donated to the conservancy by Fritz and Alva Gahagan.

It's no wonder artists were drawn to this stunning wonderland of woods, meadows and 3,500 feet of frontage along both sides of Eightmile River, a national Wild and Scenic Watershed that spills down from Chapman Falls at Devil's Hopyard State Park and empties into the Connecticut River at Hamburg Cove. The Eightmile provides important habitat for migratory fish; for years, fifth-graders from nearby Lyme Consolidated School have released Atlantic salmon fry there as part of a graduation ceremony.

I took a cool plunge into an Eightmile pool toward the end of our five-mile hike on a steamy day. Nothing better.

We had worked up a sweat tramping up and down ridges scoured by glaciation, past kettleholes, through meadows bedecked with ferns and wildflowers, and beneath towering oaks, beeches, maples, hickories, tulip trees and birches.

So many of these tableaux inspired artists in Florence Griswold's day, and continue to inspire modern-day painters and photographers, thanks to far-sighted individuals who have preserved the land.

The Pleasant Valley Preserve is owned by The Nature Conservancy and managed by The Lyme Land Conservation Trust. All the properties in the Ridgetop to River Preserves are open to the public, free of charge.

The entrance and small parking lot to the Pleasant Valley Preserve is on MacIntosh Road off Route 156, just south of the Lyme Public Library. For more information and directions to the other preserves, visit www.lymelandtrust.org or www.nature.org (<http://www.nature.org>).

Our group of four hikers encountered no other hikers during our visit — perfect for maintaining social distancing during the coronavirus pandemic. If you have a favorite, off-the-beaten track place to hike or paddle, leave and online comment on this column or send an email to s.fagin@theday.com (<mailto:s.fagin@theday.com>).

Many thanks to Barbara Cawley for suggesting we visit the Pleasant Valley Preserve.

Stay safe, remain active and please, remember to hike/paddle responsibly.