

# Ash Brook Reservation News

December 26, 2016

**Disclaimer:** I am solely responsible for the contents of this publication. As we used to say in my boyhood Florida swampbilly days, the opinions expressed here ain't in no-way no-how necessarily reflective of the views of the Union County Parks & Recreation Department. – *Marc Grobman, volunteer Trail Steward for Ash Brook Reservation.*

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Greetings to *you!* I have lots of exciting news to share with you about Ash Brook Reservation (ABR) in this year-end report. It has several links. If you have trouble using any of them please tell me. Here's what's in this issue:

- Thanks to Volunteers for Improving ABR's Hiking Experience
- Ash Brook Reservation Trail Conditions Continue Changing
- ABR Nature Walks Resuming in Spring
- County Promotes ABR, Protects from Damage
- Union County Deer Hunt, January 9 to February 11, Includes ABR, Other Parks
- Zoning Board Denies Nursing Home's Proposed Expansion Near ABR
- Planners Propose Building Oil Pipeline by ABR Border

## Thanks to Volunteers for Improving ABR's Hiking Experience

Union County's Chainsaw Crew members (**Ned O'Connell**, **Bob Czaja**, **Larry Russo**, and **Paul Hansen**) are among several volunteers who've helped improve the experience of walking Ash Brook Reservation's (ABR) nature trail. The team removes fallen trees blocking trails in county parks, and at ABR they also cut large tree branches into logs we use to raise the trail bed in muddy sections. But first, volunteers have to seek out appropriately-sized and relatively straight branches and lug them over to where the Crew can cut them. **Linda Dart** and her grandson **Phillip** did just that a few weeks ago.

Linda, and also **April Breen**, built up the trail bed in one of its muddiest areas. This past summer, **Rich Palmatier** helped trim away tremendously thick plant growth hiding the trail, and other volunteers rehabilitated trail sections. In an area where the trail crosses a ditch, **Doug Albert** helped rebuild an eroded delta that narrowed the ditch's width from six feet to about two feet, and **Dave Sleat** helped repair a ditch crossing and raise the adjacent trail bed.

**Holly Hoffman** helped identify trees along the trail to ensure the signs labeling them are accurate. And **Dorothy Smullen** provided the key to identifying a strange-looking vine with dangling strings of three-winged seed pods. Next year we'll be able to mount a sign identifying it as a wild yam! For the ABR wildlife species list, **Bill Whitehead** identified dozens of birds, and **Farrahlyn Salter** identified photos of mammals—it's not easy for non-specialists to determine if a tiny critter is a mouse, vole, or shrew! And **Lucy and Dave Pritzer**, proprietors of neighboring [Tiki Love Farm](#), continually provide invaluable assistance and support.

Finally, hats off to **Carl & Emily Nuzman** of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Scotch Plains Stake. They recruited some **forty teen volunteers** from their church and other LDS congregations to clear a logjam at the bridge near Red Hill. They then went on to remove ditch debris all the way up to the parking lot!

## Ash Brook Reservation Trail Conditions Continue Changing

Water and mud levels on ABR's trail vary tremendously by season. In summer months the entire trail is usually completely dry and even the mud is dry and cracked. But in January and February, portions of the trail can be under a foot of water. On my most recent trail hike—December 25—the water was not more than about 3" deep except in just a few places, and even there I was able to step around those parts to drier land. That's partly due to the volunteers who've helped raise the trail bed!

Unless there's snow on the ground, the first part of the trail—by the police academy—will always be fairly dry because it crosses a hill. From there, the trail gets gradually wetter. So if it begins getting too wet for you, it's time to turn back.

**Be careful if you go out when the weather is very cold or the ground is snow-covered.** If it's very cold, much of the trail could be icy. If it's under snow, you may not be able to see where the ground suddenly dips, or if a puddle of water or fallen tree branch is hidden below.

## ABR Nature Walks Resuming in Spring

We only began having ABR nature walks in June 2016. But despite that late start we held three walks for local residents, a walk for Scotch Plains Girl Scouts from Park Middle School, and a walk for sustainability class students at ABR's neighboring Union County Vocational and Technical Schools. The youngsters enjoyed the walks and learning how wildlife adapt to their environments. If you know a school, scouting, nature, outdoor photography, or other group that would enjoy a nature walk, please contact me so we can arrange one.

People from across the county also came out for two specialized tours as part of Union County's [Four Centuries in a Weekend](#) celebration. Those walks focused on the ABR area's role in the Revolutionary War (see [Event #21 here](#)), and on plants early inhabitants used for food and spices and for ink to write letters.

Next year the [Rahway River Watershed Association](#) will sponsor a different event each month as part of its "Celebrate the Rahway River: 24 Towns, One Watershed" environmental educational program. ABR will star as July's feature, with a nature walk on July 15. Other "Celebrate" events will include a green film festival, bird watching, a tour and talk on ecology and biodiversity, and a wild edible plant walk. RRWA's first "Celebrate" event of the year will be "Create a Rain Garden in Your Own Back Yard" on January 26 at the Springfield Free Public Library. The complete year-long schedule should be posted on RRWA's website by the first week of January.

There'll be more ABR walks in 2017, including a [spring-time Skunk Cabbage Appreciation Presentation & Photo Op!](#) When dates are set, you'll get an email notice.

### **County Promotes ABR, Protects from Damage**

Ash Brook Reservation has long been the park that "nobody" knows, but that's changing. For starters, the County's Parks Department issued a [news release](#) last month that not only described how volunteers cleared the logjam at the bridge near Red Hill, but also gave details about ABR's location and nature trail. Several local area newspapers, both print and online, ran the story, including *Patch* and *TAP* publications, the *Suburban News*, *Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times*, and *Westfield Leader*. Afterward, the number of visitors rose, as evidenced by increases in footprints, removal of trail maps from the pouch, and meeting more people on the trail.

The Parks Department also plans to mount a large sign on Raritan Road directing drivers to the ABR trail and will attach literature boxes to the trail entrance kiosk to hold maps and other information. It will also replace the kiosk's current map with one that's more reader-friendly, and post a downloadable trail map on its [website](#). Meanwhile, if you want a copy of an unofficial trail map, please ask and I'll email one to you.

Also, the Parks Department will issue professional-quality tree identification signs to replace the homemade computer-printed signs I've posted. These signs will include QR codes, so visitors can look up information about the trees on their smart phones.

ABR has long suffered from occasional illegal incursions from dirt bikes and other vehicles, but their frequency and associated damage increased late last year. The County mounted signs warning that vehicles are prohibited in the park, and trespassing dropped dramatically. If you see any incursions, please contact me at [marc@marcgro.com](mailto:marc@marcgro.com) or the County Parks department at 908-527-4900 or [parksinfo@ucnj.org](mailto:parksinfo@ucnj.org).

### **Union County Deer Hunt, January 9 to February 11, Includes ABR, Other Parks**

The 2017 [Union County Deer Management Program](#) will take place at Ash Brook Reservation, Oak Ridge Park, Watchung Reservation, Lenape & Nomahegan Parks, Passaic River Park, and Hawk Rise Sanctuary from January 9 to February 11. All parks will remain open for visitors, with the exception of Nomahegan Park, which will be open only for hunters. Hunting will occur only on Mondays, unless there is bad weather or a holiday. In those cases that week's hunt will be rescheduled for Wednesday or Friday. That means unless there is bad weather, the hunts will take place on Monday, January 9; Wednesday, January 18; Monday, January 23; Monday, January 30; and Monday, February 6.

The program incorporates a number of safeguards:

- Only 40 hunters will be allowed to participate, and they must be "experienced, licensed hunters who have demonstrated a proficiency in marksmanship" and attend an orientation program
- The rules are apparently intended to keep shots from traveling far by effectively requiring hunters to fire downward. They are only allowed to shoot from tree stands at least 20 feet above the ground, and at deer no further than 40 yards away. Also, they may not shoot across roads or paths

The Parks Department's website says the program is "designed to address a problem of population control; it is not intended to provide sport or recreational opportunities." Environmentalists generally favor these programs because deer overpopulations upset ecosystems, threatening the health of many wildlife species, including the deer themselves:

- When there are more deer than an area can support, they ravage the “understory”—the low-lying bushes and other plants that provide food and shelter for small animals. Their desperate feeding leaves the area under trees barren, such as you see on West Hill after you start on the trail from the police academy. The loss of native vegetation leaves the area vulnerable to non-native plant growth, which deer often won't eat
- Deer also eat emerging shoots of young trees and [seeds of native woody plants, preventing forests from maturing](#)
- Food shortages can cause deer to die of starvation, cross highways where they may be struck by cars, and invade residential areas in search of food

For an example of environmentalists' support of deer management programs, see the Nature Conservancy blog article, [“Too Many Deer: A Bigger Threat to Eastern Forests than Climate Change?”](#)

### Zoning Board Denies Nursing Home's Proposed Expansion near ABR

Scotch Plains' zoning board voted unanimously this month to deny variances that would allow Ashbrook Nursing & Rehabilitation Center to greatly expand. The center is located on Raritan Road near Terrill Road and ABR's west corner.

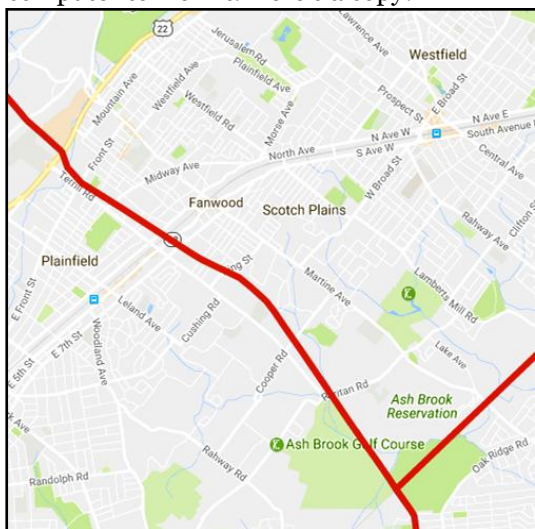
According to news articles in the *Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times*, which is sold as a print publication and also combined online with the [Westfield Leader](#), neighbors objected to the plan's size and potential for “commercializing” the area. The center wanted to raze its current building and replace it with a three-story, 47-foot building; a four-story, 60-foot building; and a five-story, 68-foot building. It also wanted to more than double its number of beds from 114 to 240 and more than double its workforce from 78 to 184. Neighbors also complained that would increase traffic on already crowded Raritan Road.

The new buildings would have a total footprint of about 46,000 square feet. In addition, the news articles indicated the center wanted to more than quadruple its number of parking spaces, from about 57 spaces to 240. The paper did not say if people raised concerns that the resulting loss of permeable soil might increase storm runoff and flood adjacent areas, such as Ash Brook Reservation, nor did it report if the nursing center is considering an appeal of the zoning board's decision. You can read the article on the zoning board's denial of the variances by clicking [here](#).

### Planners Propose Building Oil Pipeline by ABR Border

According to maps released by the [Coalition Against Pilgrim Pipeline](#) (CAPP), the most recently-known proposed route for the pipeline would run through Scotch Plains roughly parallel to and slightly east of Terrill Road. After crossing Raritan Road, it appears it would continue along the PSE&G power lines on the ABR/Ash Brook Golf Course border. Upon reaching the railroad tracks by the Clark border, it would turn eastward and run parallel to the tracks across Lake Avenue, Lamberts Mill Road, and Westfield Avenue

To see the maps, go to <https://stopilgrimpipeline.com/maps>. The easiest to read map is at the link for [KMZ visualization file-NJ](#). You can zoom in on the map to make it larger, but you must have Google Earth installed on your computer to view it. Here's a copy:



CAPP says that in some locations the Albany, NY to Linden, NJ pipeline would actually consist of two parallel pipelines: “Bakken shale oil would be sent south; refined products (including kerosene) would be sent north.” Since the pipeline would not cross an international border, CAPP says, the federal government would have very little role in regulating its route. “Almost all the regulation is at the state level,” CAPP reports, and so far, “Pilgrim has had preliminary contact with the [New Jersey] DEP, but it has made no filings yet.” CAPP posts updates on the pipeline's legal status in New Jersey [here](#).

#### Please contact me if you

- Want information about any aspect of Ash Brook Reservation or a trail map
- Would like to talk with me about leading school, scouting, or other groups on a nature walk
- Are interested in helping improve the Ash Brook Reservation trail and trail hiking experience
- Want to be removed from this email list. If so, I'll send you a confirmation of removal and that'll be it!

Thanks, Marc

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