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News about Union County's wilderness park, located off Raritan Road in Scotch Plains, behind Union County Vocational-Technical Schools and to the right of the John H. Stamler Police Academy.

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Disclaimer: This is not a Union County Department of Parks & Recreation publication and does not necessarily reflect its views.

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Hunters now culling deer populations in Ash Brook Reservation and other locations: The 2016 Union County Deer Management Program is taking place January 4 to February 13 in the following county parks and areas:

- **Ash Brook Reservation** (Clark, Scotch Plains)
- **Hawk Rise Sanctuary and Linden Municipal Landfill** (Linden)
- **Lenape Park and Nomahegan Park** (Cranford, Springfield, Union, Kenilworth, Westfield)
- **Oak Ridge Park** (Clark, Edison)
- **Passaic River Park** (Berkeley Heights, New Providence, Summit)
- **Watchung Reservation** (Berkeley Heights, Scotch Plains, Springfield, Mountainside, Watchung, Summit)

Ash Brook Reservation will *not* be closed for the hunt. I sometimes go to ABR on hunt days, but always

- Wear a bright orange vest
- Walk only on the trail
- Every five minutes or so whistle the first two lines of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat." Whistling is a sound similar to many bird calls, so it's unlikely to disturb animals, while the melody is so well-known that hunters are likely to recognize it and realize a human is nearby

However, if you want to avoid going to a park on a hunting day, here's the schedule:

- **Monday, Jan. 4** unless moved to the following Wednesday or Friday due to bad weather
- **Monday, Jan. 11** unless moved to the following Wednesday or Friday due to bad weather
- **Wednesday, Jan. 18** unless moved to the following Friday due to bad weather
- **Monday, Jan. 25** unless moved to the following Wednesday or Friday due to bad weather
- **Monday, Feb. 1** unless moved to the following Wednesday or Friday due to bad weather
- **Monday, Feb. 8** unless moved to the following Wednesday or Friday in due to bad weather

The Parks Department's website gives these reasons for the hunt: "Browsing for food by large numbers of deer has caused a loss of forest understory in park areas throughout the northeastern United States. The overpopulation of deer threatens the survival of the plant and animal communities that are important to the ecology of these parks." You'll find additional information at <http://ucnj.org/press-releases/public-info/2015/12/30/union-county-deer-management-program-to-start-monday-january-4/>

For more information about the need for deer management, visit the New Jersey Audubon Society's "Land Preservation & Stewardship" webpage and scroll down to the "Deer Management" section or use your search function to find it. Here's the URL: <http://www.njaudubon.org/SectionConservation/GRIssuesLandPreservationStewardship.aspx>

Recent trail improvements: On Jan. 2, two students in a Union County College community service honors program built up a muddy section of the trail bed near West Hill's south side. On Dec. 3, Union County VoTech sustainability class students returned for a second time to build up the trail bed in an often-flooded area. Read about their second visit and see photos at <http://ucnj.org/parks-recreation/adopt-a-trail-adopt-a-park/>

Blue plastic bags on shrubs mark invasive species: When you see blue plastic bags tied on shrubs, please don't remove them. They mark invasive winged euonymus and Japanese barberry to be carefully removed in warmer months when they are no longer dormant. "Invasive species" are plants and animals that are not native to an ecosystem and that harm native species. Winged euonymus (*Euonymus alatus*), native to Asia, "forms dense thickets in natural areas, preventing many other native woody and herbaceous plants from growing," says the Nature Conservancy. Japanese barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*) not only crowds out native species, but appears to "alter soil pH and nitrate levels, creating conditions that are beneficial for its growth alone. White-tailed deer [*Odocoileus virginianus*] avoid it, choosing to eat nearby native species while birds enjoy the bright red berries throughout the winter." When the birds defecate, they spread barberry seeds to new locations.

Trail conditions and forecast: After a terribly dry summer and fall, the wet season has finally begun! Current conditions:

- **Trail entrance by the police academy to West Hill's south side:** Dry to moist* (see key below)

- **West Hill to about halfway into the swamp:** Sneaker-friendly, then mostly ankle-boot friendly until the drainage ditch before Red Hill
- **Spur trail and Red Hill:** Dry to moist*
*Asterisked areas will probably stay dry to moist throughout the year

Key to mud and water depths: Dry to moist: <1". Sneaker-friendly: 1" to 3". Ankle boot friendly: 3" to 5".

Trail sights & sightings: October, November, and December's unusually warm weather sparked some April/May-like activities. On Christmas Day I saw a common dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) in full yellow flower, green frogs (*Rana clamitans melayota*), and freshly-sprouted oyster mushrooms (*Pleurotis ostreatis*). Skunk cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*) had sprung up to 6" heights. On a Jan. 3 visit to Red Hill, I found many of the highbush blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*) bushes had sprouted flower buds, some of which looked ready to open. Let's hope that future frosts won't kill the buds of shrubs that broke out of dormancy in response to the warm weather.

Recent lower temperatures stimulated the growth of two common cold weather jelly fungi that thrive on small dead tree branches: tree ear fungus (*Auricularia auricula*), which is a wrinkly dark-brown mushroom resembling those used in hot and sour soup, and probable witch's butter (*Tremella mesenterica*), a fungus looking much like tree ear, but bright yellow in color. Red berries still hang on winterberry holly (*Ilex verticillata*), a deciduous shrub usually about 10' in height, barberry, usually 3' high or less, and various rose species (*Rosa*). Greenbriar (*Smilax rotundifolia*), which resembles rose, but has solid green canes, retains its round, black-purple berries.

When or if, snow falls this winter, look for interesting animal tracks. Raccoon tracks are easily identifiable—the hind footprint resembles a small (3" long) human footprint with long toes, and its front print is like a human hand, but with a small finger replacing the thumb.

Trail map—do you have the latest edition, or need a new copy? If the bottom of your map says it's version 2.0, you have the most recent one. Please contact me if you'd like me to send you one as a PDF attachment. I hope to develop a new one soon that identifies recognizable locations along the trail.

Parking reminder: Unless the lot is almost deserted, do not park in the spaces with yellow borders, which are reserved for the police academy. You may also park in any marked space near the spur entrance and get to the trail from there.

Would you like to improve and maintain the trail? Winter month tasks primarily involve shoveling mud to build up the trail bed. Spring tasks are less muddy and physically demanding but certainly important: pruning back rose, blackberry, and greenbriar, and later, pruning and cutting other plants blocking the trail. Please contact me if you would like to help.

Help spread the news about Ash Brook Reservation and trail walks: I enjoy leading small groups on trail walks. If you know an organization or school group interested in a tour, please refer them to me. Also, if you know someone who would like to receive this newsletter, please tell them to contact me to get on this mailing list:

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Thank you, and happy hiking!