QR-1 – Welcome. Welcome to the Hudson and Nancy Winn Preserve. My name is Dan Driscoll, the Mohawk Hudson Land Conservancy’s preserve steward for the Winn Preserve. The original 129-acre Preserve was donated in 1997 by Nancy Winn in memory of her husband, Hudson Winn. The Preserve has been expanded several times as a result of additional gifts and purchases; for example, the parking lot and kiosk are on a 7.7 acre parcel donated by Bruce and Diana Shank of Altamont in 2003. Today the Preserve is about 180-acres. It has about 3.3 miles of trails. Most of the trails are relatively flat and easy to hike, but there are two trails, the Blue and Yellow trails in the eastern part of the Preserve, that go down the Helderberg Escarpment.

The Helderberg Escarpment is a major feature of western Albany County. The edge of the Escarpment runs through the Preserve with extensive rock outcrops and cliffs. It is also the focus of New York State’s Thacher Park, about five miles to the southeast, as well as The Nature Conservancy’s Limestone Rise Preserve about two miles to the west on Route 146.

As you hike through the Preserve, you will notice that the soils are very thin so that the bedrock is exposed in many places. Other features you will notice are sinkholes and deep crevasses. More about the geology at another stop, but before you leave the parking area, notice the deep sinkhole behind and to the left of the kiosk. A farmer apparently built the stone wall before the sinkhole formed – yes, sinkholes are still being created in the area.

QR-2 – Geology. The bedrock throughout most of the Winn Preserve is Coeymans limestone, formed during the early Devonian period, about 400 million years ago. When rainwater flows through cracks in the limestone, it slowly dissolves the limestone creating crevasses that can be up to 16-inches wide and 20-feet deep. The resulting geological landscape is known as Karst terrain. You often see areas where the crevasses run perpendicular to each other, creating large blocks of limestone in a checkerboard pattern called limestone pavement. Other features of Karst areas are chimney rocks, caves, sinking streams, sinkholes, and springs.

As you stand at the junction of the White and Yellow trails, there are small sinkholes all around you, but about fifteen feet toward Street Road is a large, unusual sinkhole with vertical sides. It is likely that the sides were the walls of crevasses surrounding blocks of
limestone. Other crevasses in the area have the same orientation. Thirty feet to the west along the Yellow trail you will see a crevasse extending toward Street Road that is parallel to the short walls of the sinkhole; about sixty feet to the south along the White trail is a crevasse parallel to the long walls of the sinkhole. It is speculated that there is a large cave passage below the sinkhole and that the limestone blocks fell into the cave.

QR-3 – Original Preserve Boundary. You are standing at the western boundary of the original Winn Preserve. To the east is the land donated by Nancy Winn in 1997; to the west is a more recent 11.3-acre acquisition, purchased in 2001 with a donation from my parents, Ed and Mary Driscoll. My parents also provided the endowment for the Preserve, assuring perpetual stewardship of the property.

The Red trail runs north from here along the original boundary; taking that trail, it is about 500 feet to Street Road and a winter parking area on Town property. Following the White trail east about 1000 feet will take you to another short Red trail segment leading to a cabin built by the Winns. East 2000 feet along the White trail takes you to the Green trail – the historic Truax Road.

As you hike through the Preserve, notice that mature hemlocks and maples comprise most of the forest canopy. Mosses and ferns are prevalent on the forest floor. A number of specialized mosses make use of the habitat found in the limestone crevasses.

Predating the dinosaurs, ferns have thrived even after the more successful flowering plants came along and dominated our green world. There are approximately 100 species of ferns in the northeast. About 40 of them are common to cool, moist, shady places; most of these are found in our acid northeast forests, and many more on limestone cliffs and rock outcrops.

QR-4 – Winn’s Cabin. Nancy Winn was an Albany Symphony Orchestra cellist; her husband, Hudson Winn, was a State University of New York biology professor specializing in ornithology. The Winns built this cabin, and for more than twenty years spent weekends exploring the woods and studying birds, aided by Hudson’s ornithological expertise. Hudson’s mist nets, used to capture birds for banding, still stand in a corner of the cabin.
The Barred Owl is one of my favorite birds, and one I hear often at the Preserve. Its call sounds like “who cooks for you – who cooks for you all-----.” Another bird of particular ornithological interest is the Hermit Thrush; found throughout the Preserve, it is widely hailed as North America’s most gifted songster. [Play Hermit Thrush recording.]

Notice the wide and deep crevasse in front of the cabin. There is also a large sinkhole near the cabin. Follow the Red trail toward Street Road; cross the Green Truax Road trail; walk to the right of the circular group of four basswood trees; the sinkhole is directly ahead. Is that a cave in the side of the sinkhole? I don’t think so.

By the way, those four basswood trees stump-sprouted after the original tree was cut down. From the diameter of the circle you can judge how large the original tree was; the diameter of the new trees is an indication of how long ago the original tree was cut. It is likely that the original basswood tree was cut to make pillboxes, at one time an important industry in the Town of Knox.

Scouting groups are welcome to use the cabin. Contact the Mohawk Hudson Land Conservancy’s office if you are interested.

QR-5 – Truax Road. Truax Road, the Green trail, is an old farm-to-market road. The Beers 1866 map shows that the Truax farm was about 1 ½ miles west of here.

The Town of Knox Zoning Ordinance specifies Truax Road as the southern boundary of Knox Land Conservation District II. With little or no soil cover, crevassed limestone permits liquids to flow unfiltered into the water table, potentially contaminating nearby wells (the primary source of drinking water in the area). For that reason, in 1974, the Town of Knox set aside much of this area, including about half of the Winn Preserve, as a Conservation District. The only development permitted in this District is public recreation.

This part of Truax Road passes close to the edge of the Helderberg Escarpment. Just to the north of here, the Escarpment drops-off and forms a natural amphitheatre that the Conservancy uses for drum-circles and other such events.

Between the trail and the edge of the Escarpment is a grassy area that founding board member Dr. John Abbuhl refers to as a “fairy woods.” Is it really grass though? Look closely, feel a leaf, and remember the mnemonic poem:

Sedges have edges,
Rushes are round,
Grasses are hollow,
What have you found?

Another version ends:

QR- 5  Natural Amphitheatre
Grasses have nodes
All the way to the ground.

QR-6 – Helderberg Escarpment. Take the Blue trail northeast. After passing through an area of limestone pavement, the trail will take you along the top edge of the Helderberg Escarpment and then down the Escarpment. About 150 feet before heading down there are several chimney rocks standing along the edge of the Escarpment. If you are here in the spring, you will see red columbine growing on top of the chimney rocks.

As you get to the bottom of the second steep section, just after the switchback, look up to the right to see how far you have descended. To your left is a patch of Maidenhair Fern; it is the only fern in the northeast that is palmately branched.

The trail eventually curves to the right along the base of the cliff. Look for another patch of Maidenhair Fern. On the left (and sometime underfoot) is a wetland that extends along the plateau. The dominant fern between the wetland and cliff is Bladder Fern with its long tapering, drooping fronds. This fern reproduces by means of spores, and also by bulblets which drop and grow into new plants. Avoid the poison ivy east of the wetland. At the end of the Blue trail, the Yellow trail will take you back up the Escarpment to the Green trail.

QR-7 – Walking Fern. Because of extensive unauthorized ATV use, this Red trail segment is not maintained. But if you walk about 100 feet along the Red trail and then to your right, over to the base of the cliff, you will find large blocks of limestone. On one of these blocks is a colony of Walking Fern. Each frond of this remarkable fern has a long tapering tip, like a spear point. Walking Fern can reproduce by means of spores, but also by the tip of a frond touching the rock (or moss) and taking root – hence the name “ Walking Fern.”

Back on the Red trail, if you walk another few hundred feet down the trail to the low point in the trail, you will find a spring issuing from the base of the talus slope (the sloping area of accumulated rock debris at the base of the cliff). This spring, flowing out of the limestone cliff, appears to flow continually, creating a small stream. The stream flows down the Escarpment to where it joins an un-named creek along the northern boundary of the Preserve. That creek then flows to the Bozen Kill, about 2 miles to the northeast.
QR-8 – Loft Property. You are standing on Truax Road (the Green trail) along the eastern boundary of an eighteen acre parcel donated to the Conservancy by Arne and Helen Loft in 2006. The property had belonged to Mary Stuart, Helen Loft’s mother. The land was acquired in 1881 by Ellen Witter, Helen Loft’s grandmother, and was used as a source of firewood for the Witter family.

There is a trail heading east from this point to Witter Road. The trail is on private property, but was the Loft’s normal access to the property. Part way down the trail is an old cabin that was once a ski shack; yes, there was a small ski area here. The cabin can be seen by looking down from the northeast corner of the Loft parcel.

The deed for the property refers to part of the property (or adjacent property) as “limekill & stump lots” or “limekill field.” So presumable limestone was taken from the property (or nearby) to be processed in a local lime kiln. The lime produced was generally used to make mortar for construction. These old kilns were made of stone and generally built into the side of a stone cliff. The local lime kiln has not been found, but there are still recognizable kilns in the Helderberg area.

QR-9 – Orchard Trail. This section of the Blue trail, with its limestone outcrops, is one of the prettiest areas on the preserve. As you walk farther to the southwest you come to an area that appears to have been an old orchard; it is becoming overgrown. One of the invasives is buckthorn. A few years ago we tried to remove the buckthorn, using equipment loaned by Thacher Nature Center. But we only succeeded in clearing about ¼ acre of the approximately 10-acre orchard.

The Conservancy originally owned only about 2 acres of the orchard. In 2009 we acquired another 4 acres. There is still another 4 landlocked acres in private ownership.

At its southern end the Blue trail meets the Yellow trail. North on the Yellow trail, then west on the White trail, leads back to parking lot and kiosk. I hope you enjoyed your tour of the Winn Preserve. If you are not a member of the Mohawk Hudson Land Conservancy, please pick up a brochure at the kiosk. Your support is vital to help us protect land – both for its value as wildlife and plant habitat and for public recreation.