Join us as we share 'Cumberland's best-kept secret'

This story is a first in a series

Lady Slippers, once a rare delight, seem almost plentiful these days. A patch was poking up near the entrance to the Scott Farm trail in late May. While Lady Slippers aren't endangered in Rhode Island any longer, this area's soil does support a number of rare and endangered Rhode Island plants that naturalists hope will be enjoyed but undisturbed.

CUMBERLAND - The Blackstone River, the sprawling brick mills, the old monastery building that became the library. All are images that help to characterize the town of Cumberland. But what really defines Cumberland's look and feel? More and more, people are pointing to its conservation lands and the miles of trails that make them so readily accessible. "Cumberland's best kept secret," is the phrase you'll hear often from members of the Cumberland Land Trust.

At the same time, trust members will also concede, it's only recently that they've begun really publicizing their land holdings and tell folks how to access them. Bigger signs, maps, and markers on the trails all represent a new approach in stewardship for this organization that will mark 25 years this fall.

And while the land trust is counting 354 acres preserved, with more pending, Cumberland has additional acreages under the town's control, and a large chunk managed by the state. But where are all these properties and how can residents access them?

Through a series of stories, The Breeze has set out to identify the major trails and open spaces available - from location to size to difficulty, along with a bit of history related to each.

There are many to choose among. All told, one-third of the town, 5,620 acres of the town's 16,896 acres (based on 26.4 square miles of land area), are protected from development with much of it available to the public.

So much land is protected, that the Cumberland Land Trust folks are getting close to realizing the seemingly lofty goal of creating an unbroken Cumberland Greenway, a network of trails from the Monastery to Diamond Hill State Reservation. Hikers will be walking on both town, state and land trust properties as they make their way through the leafy center of town.
The rough outline by the land trust's Joseph Pailthorpe takes hikers from The Monastery Grounds, across Angell Road to Lippitt Pond through Long Brook, to the Otis Smith Farm, across Scott Road to Scott Brook, then to Pound Road through the Burlingame property exiting on Nate Whipple Highway. From there, hikers would pick up the Schofield Farm and travel the middle school cross-country trails to the Emerson property, then east to Diamond Hill Road the the Diamond Hill Park. The Warner Trail will take hikers to the Massachusetts line.

Nine branch trails off the main route have also been identified.

Gaps do exist, Pailthorpe says, with the most complicated in the Lippitt Estates area. However, there is "100 percent connectivity" between Nate Whipple and Tower Hill Road and he's working on easements, he said, and identifying connecting town roads.

Who owns all the open spaces? By the town's count, 500 of the acres are held privately by the Audubon Society, Camp Ker Anna, Beagle Club, Lippitt Estates Association and Sisters of Mercy. The Pawtucket Water Supply Board holds another 1,659 acres.

But all the rest are held by: the Cumberland Land Trust, 354 acres with 36 acres pending; Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, 526 acres; Cumberland schools, 90.5 acres; and the town, 2,501 acres. That's miles and miles of well established trails, complete with maps and markers in many places. It's time to get out and enjoy the open spaces. First stop, the historic Otis Smith farm on Scott Road.

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**Otis Smith trails a pleasant hike for young families**

CUMBERLAND - Mid May was feeling more like summer the afternoon that Randy Tuomisto, who's president of the Cumberland Land Trust, guided me along the Otis Smith Farm and Rowbottom Preserve trails off Scott Road. Three trails here wind through 56.5 acres of woodland between Scott Road and Lippitt Avenue that's criss-crossed in stone walls and distinguished by a mass of tumbling boulders at its main entrance.

This is a nearly U-shaped holding made up of two major pieces of land - the Otis Smith Farm of 27 acres acquired from Brown University and the Kenneth and Barbara Rowbottom land of 28 acres. Both were acquired in 2000 at a total cost of $249,000 that was largely covered by private and state grants. The area was enlarged by another acre with a donation from Carl and Wayne Brockmann.

Set apart from the trail and privately owned is the nearby Otis Smith farmhouse on Scott Road, Cumberland.
The farm property lies on both sides of Scott Road and is subdivided from the colonial-era house and barn buildings that are privately owned and once belonged to a descendant of John Smith, a contemporary of Roger Williams.

The main entrance is on Scott Road, opposite pole 74 and a small sign for Crawford Row. Alas, the land trust's sign is small and blends in with trees - I missed it the first several times I looked. Parking is limited but there is room to pull off the street. Trust members try to keep a box stocked with maps. This walk sent us into a woodland that's characterized by an unusual number of uprooted trees and broken limbs left where they landed after Tropical Storm Irene. The trails are well marked, yellow, white and red slashes of paint by the Boy Scouts and would be easy enough for a family with young children to manage. The three are linked but not looped and you'll cover a bit more than a mile in one direction if you explore all three.

About the markings, Randy and others told me they'd like a uniformed look to the trail markers, perhaps in concert with the state's 23 other land trusts. While mostly treed, the area does open up at one point to a luscious splash of pale green ferns speckled in sunlight sprinkling through the tree canopy. Rock walls abound, evidence here, as in most of the town's wooded areas, of its farmland past. Randy remarks that the beauty of this area rivals New Hampshire's woodlands "that people drive hours to see."

You'll likely notice the dead tree standing firm at the edge of the first trail with woodpecker holes. We also spotted a scattering of Lady Slippers that were just popping out of the ground that we missed the first time we walked by. (They're no longer endangered but won't last if you pick them or try to transplant them, so just leave them be.) There is a long list of rare and endangered plants associated with this property that thrive on the pre-cadmium greenstone here, according to The Nature Conservancy, one of the foundations that granted funds to buy the land. Stick to the established trails and you'll avoid damaging them.

I spotted a pair of mallards on the edge of Little Pond and there's what remains of a manmade ditch that long ago carried water to farm fields from Little Pond. Randy notes that although summertime may be a comfortable time for hiking here, don't overlook fall's foliage or the snow-shoeing opportunities.

If you have time, exit the trail where it links on Club Drive near a newly built house and walk along to the pond beach area on Lippitt Avenue for a strong reminder of the old days when this was a summer colony. The curving, narrow roadway here, edged in day lilies, contributes to the strong sense I felt of a bygone era when kids were sent outside in the morning and played until it was too dark to see the ball.

Just a few houses front the 18-acre Little Pond or Lippitt Pond, and the beach is gated for the Lippitt Estates Community Association. Randy said the land trust is hoping to further limit development by purchasing a couple more small lots across the pond.

Pick up the trail again between two marked boulders on Lippitt Avenue that were placed there to discourage all-terrain vehicle operators and head back to Scott Road.
Randy Tuomisto, president of the Cumberland Land Trust, walks among the boulders, fallen trees, and the edge of Lippitt Pond, all part of the family-friendly features of the Otis Smith land. (Valley Breeze photo by Marcia Green)

Randy Tuomisto, president of the Cumberland Land Trust, checks the supply of trail maps at the entrance to the Smith Farm land on Scott Road.

Tumbles of rocks characterize the Smith Farm land. This one is near the entrance. (Valley Breeze Photos by Marcia Green)
Here's the map that outlines the three trails contained in the Otis Smith/Rowbottom lands. Pick one up near the entrance or go to the Cumberland Land Trust's website for more details.