

Over the Creek and Through the Woods—on a Nature Quest

Begin by walking across the boardwalk toward the marsh.

- Do you see any fish in Fishkill Creek? In spring, fish that normally live in the ocean (such as shad) migrate up the river and into tributaries like this to spawn.
- Look for “helicopter” seeds. What trees do they come from? How do the seed shapes help them spread?
- As the creek flows from the waterfall to the marsh, how does its speed change?
- Can you smell any flowers? Why do plants produce a sweet smell?
- Look for animal tracks in the mud.
- Find the trail markers posted on tree trunks. Why are they there?
- Take the Red trail and try to walk without making a sound. You may be rewarded with many different bird calls.
- At the marsh overlook stand quietly and you might see some impressive birds! Look and listen for the red-winged blackbird.
- Can you spot a tree trunk that a beaver has chewed?
- Back on the trail, remember “leaves of three, let them be”—that’s poison ivy!
- Notice any buttons or fabric along the trail? These are remains from the factory.
- Back on the White Trail, walk up the hill and around the bend for a spectacular view of the marsh and mountains behind it.



Why we protected this place...

Scenic Hudson purchased the 12-acre Madam Brett Park in 1996 to protect it from further development, providing an urban oasis where people can experience nature. This land is slowly recovering from years of abuse as an industrial dumping ground. While most regeneration occurs naturally, conservation projects undertaken by Scenic Hudson help speed up the process. Today, school groups come to Madam Brett Park to learn about the site’s history and ecological renewal. The many waterfowl species that live and feed in Fishkill Marsh also make it a popular destination for bird watchers.



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NatureNotes created by Susan Hereth. Illustrations by Kate Brill.

NatureNotes

MADAM BRETT PARK *Beacon*



Fishkill Creek, which flows through Madam Brett Park before entering the Hudson River, played a major role in Beacon’s history. The creek powered Madam Brett’s gristmill and, later, factories such as the Tioronda Hat Works, the brick building next to the park. In spring, shad and striped bass spawning at the creek’s mouth, lured commercial fishermen. While traces of this past remain, Madam Brett Park now is an important home for wildlife—and a great place for people to connect with it.

Who’s Scenic Hudson?

We’re a group of dedicated people who care about the Hudson River Valley. Starting in 1963, our founders fought to stop a power plant from destroying a mountain. Since then Scenic Hudson has continued protecting special places like this park. Now we’re focused on Saving the Land That Matters Most—working with communities and other partners to preserve lands of the highest scenic, ecological and agricultural significance.

For more information about the 50-plus parks we’ve created or enhanced, visit www.scenichudson.org/parks.



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Madam Brett Park: A Stroll through Nature & History

● Fishkill Creek

Native Americans called Fishkill Creek *Tioronda*—"little water that flows into big water"—because it drains into the Hudson River. The Hudson gets most of its water from creeks, streams and smaller rivers (known as tributaries) that flow into it.

From the Hudson's source in the Adirondack Mountains to New York City, where it empties into the Atlantic Ocean, the river travels 315 miles. The part of the river from New York City to Troy is called an estuary. It contains salt and fresh water, and its level rises and falls with the ocean's tides. The estuary provides important habitat for fish and animals, including striped bass, blue crabs and great blue herons.

Fishkill Creek's lower portion also is affected by the tides. As high tide approaches, the creek appears to flow upstream. As the tide turns, it flows back toward the Hudson.

Using the map on the back page, can you find the City of Beacon and the Fishkill Creek? Trace the water's path to the Atlantic Ocean.



● Madam Brett

After the death of her husband in 1718, Catheryna Rombout Brett was left to fend for herself and three young sons in the wilderness. She turned to what resources she had—a one-third share in the Rombout Patent, 85,000 acres stretching along the Hudson River from Fishkill Creek to Wappinger Creek purchased in 1683 by her father and two partners from local Indians. Here in 1709 she and her husband had built a home (still standing on Beacon's Van Nydeck Avenue) and gristmill.

Madam Brett prospered by selling land to settlers, who built a bustling community out of the forest. Farmers all along the Hudson brought grain to be ground into flour in her mill.

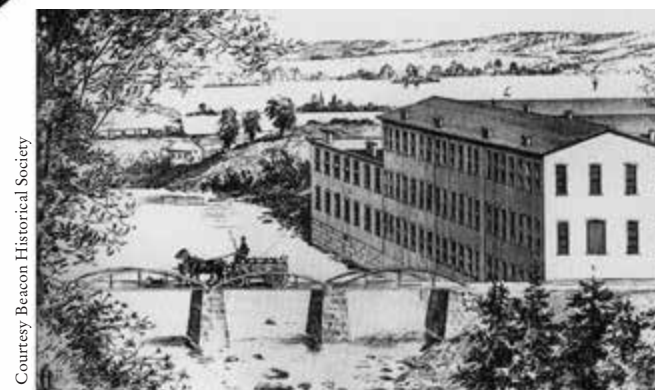
No one's sure where Madam Brett's mill stood; its location was not recorded in detail. Where you're standing, the power of Fishkill Creek and easy access to shipping on the Hudson made this a great location for commerce in the 1700s and for centuries to come.



● Using & Abusing Fishkill Creek

The large brick building next to Madam Brett Park was the Tioronda Hat Works, opened in 1879. Thanks to the railroad and the creek, the hat industry became a vital part of Beacon's economy until the 1940s, earning the city the nickname the "Hat-Making Capital of New York." Other industries relying on the creek included button makers and wool recyclers (which turned wool fibers from old clothing into new fabrics).

While these businesses provided jobs, they had a big drawback—pollution. Industries dumped wastes into Fishkill Creek or along its banks. (You can still find mounds of wool.) The land also was excavated several times, allowing non-native, "invasive" plants like phragmites (depicted at left) to replace native species such as cattails (on the right). Both of these plants can be seen in the marsh.



Courtesy Beacon Historical Society

● Tioronda Bridge

The stone columns of Fishkill Creek were part of the Tioronda Bridge. Constructed between 1869 and 1873, this was one of only two iron truss bridges in the United States with a unique "bowstring" design. The City of Beacon dismantled the bridge in 2006 over safety concerns but hopes to replace it in the future.



Courtesy Beacon Historical Society

● Observation Deck

From here you get a great view of Tioronda Falls and can see remains of an old sluiceway—an artificial channel for carrying off a portion of Fishkill Creek's current to power a mill. Barely visible atop the falls is the stone foundation of a railroad bridge. It carried trains destined for Newburgh and western New York State on the Erie Railroad.



● Poison Ivy: Friend or Foe?

Poison ivy is recognized by its clusters of three leaves. Because many humans are allergic to the oil poison ivy plants release—it causes a very itchy rash—remember the saying "Leaves of three, let it be."

Poison ivy plants produce yellowish-white or greenish-white flowers that bloom from May to July. The flowers then give way to berry-like fruits that are whitish-gray.

Poison ivy may be a nuisance to humans, but many animals depend on it for survival. Birds such as Northern cardinals and American goldfinches use the thread-like hairs from its vines to build nests. Small animals like frogs, spiders, chipmunks and turtles rely on its leaves and stems for shelter. Poison ivy also is a food source: white-tailed deer, muskrat and Eastern cottontails devour its leaves and stems; birds like crows, bluebirds and turkeys eat the fruit; and insects munch the leaves.

● Marsh Overlook

Fishkill Creek and its marsh are an important ecosystem. Different plants and animals inhabit the many areas found within the park: turbulent falls, swift rapids, lazy shoals and creek banks of varying types—high, low, rocky, tree-covered and swampy. The marsh before you is particularly important. Known as a freshwater tidal wetland, it's a spawning ground and nursery for anadromous fish (such as American shad and striped bass), which live in oceans but breed in fresh water. It's a home for amphibians such as frogs and aquatic mammals (including muskrats) and a hunting ground for ospreys, bald eagles and other birds of prey. It also serves as a stopover for migratory birds.

