

# On the Trail: Dunderly Brook Trail

The Dunderly Brook Trail in Little Compton, recently opened to the public, provides access to forested wetlands and freshwater swamps at Bumblebee Preserve, an extensive wild area that has been owned and managed by the Nature Conservancy since 2001. The trail wanders through a pristine coastal oak holly forest, crosses streams of several sizes that contribute to Dunderly Brook, and arrives at Bumble Bee Pond.

The unique feature of this trail is that the entire journey to Bumble Bee Pond and back, a round trip of 1.2 miles, is accomplished over an elevated boardwalk that is wheelchair accessible. Built of black locust timbers over simple steel piers, the structure provides for easy travel and yet protects the plants and animals that inhabit the preserve from disturbance.

The final portion is a grassy trail around Bumble Bee pond, extending into some old field and meadow areas, which are “singing grounds” in early spring for American Woodcock. Whether visitors travel on foot or with an assistive device, the boardwalk allows for year-round access for viewing wetland plants, which is not usually possible on conventional trails.

At the outset, the trail enters into a woodland on mineral soils of Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*), Black Cherry (*Prunus serotina*) and Black Ash (*Fraxinus nigra*) through a grove of arching Speckled Alder (*Alnus incana*). The ground here in late June is covered with white blooming Dwarf Raspberry (*Rubus pubescens*). The trail soon enters a much wetter area, and within a few hundred feet the trail has a short diversion, allowing visitors to inspect a small, open bog containing cattails, grasses, and sedges. Surrounded by ferns, tree frogs and spring peepers command this space after spring rains. Beyond the first stream crossing, at a stone wall, the forest floor shows full development, and its

canopy changes to include Black Gum (*Nyssa sylvatica*), of which there are some impressive clonal stands, American Beech (*Fagus grandifolia*), Black Ash (*Fraxinus nigra*), and a mixture of Black, Red and White Oak (*Quercus velutina*, *coccinea*, and *alba*). American Holly (*opaca*) is present throughout as the major sub-canopy species, as are Ironwood (*Carpinus caroliniana*), and American Hophornbeam (*Ostrya virginiana*). At one point near the final third of the boardwalk there is a grove of eight or ten, 60-foot Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*). Since there are few Sassafras in the understory, they are easy to miss, but once spotted these individuals are impressive.

In the open boggy areas, shrubs become prominent and include Smooth Arrowwood (*Viburnum recognitum*), Highbush Blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*), Sweet Pepperbush (*Clethra alnifolia*), Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*), and Swamp Azalea (*Rhododendron viscosum*), among many others. Herbaceous wetland plants are abundant as well in these shrub swamps, just below and to the sides of the trail. The blooming species vary with the season but

multiple grasses, sedges, and horsetails occupy the ground layer year-round. Ferns are also abundant,



The wheelchair-accessible boardwalk allows for year-round access for viewing wetland plants, whether visitors travel on foot or with an assistive device



by Dick Fisher & John Berg

lining the trail from end to end. At least eight fern species have been identified.

At the major brook crossing, which occurs in a sunny clearing that is lined with Buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*), Black Elder (*Sambucus canadensis*), Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*) and Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*), deep stream channels are interspersed with mats of tall Reed Canary Grass (*Phalaris arundinacia*) and sedges.

The boardwalk trail comes to an end at an earthen dam that borders Bumble Bee Pond. Created for watering cattle in the 1940s, this retention pond has reverted to open water, marsh, and wet meadow habitats that are much used by waterfowl, amphibians, and spotted turtles. Cattail (*Typha latifolia*) dominates this area, but Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*) coexists, as does Sweet Flag (*Acorus calamus*). In perimeter areas, copses of willow abound, along with Shadblow (*Amelanchier canadensis*) and some relic Pears (*Pyrus communis*).

The plants mentioned are dominant species that define the habitat of the coastal oak—holly forest. Many more are of course present, which may be of special interest to individuals. An inventory completed a few years ago documented over 350 plant species at Bumble Bee Preserve and undoubtedly more exist. The special access that the elevated trail affords should yield more information about this wetland plant community over the next few years. Regardless of your mobility status come visit this unique environment and try the Dunderly Brook Trail as a place for quiet reflection and a close look at wetland botany.

**Access:**

*The trail head is located just west of the Little Compton Commons and the Wilbur & McMabon School behind the tennis courts. From Meeting House Lane turn north on to an unpaved lane adjacent to the baseball fields.*

Two of more than eight species of fern that have been identified along the Dunderly Brook Trail



## RI Wild Plant Society

The Rhode Island Wild Plant Society, Inc., is a nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to the preservation and protection of Rhode Island's native plants and their habitats.

### Our Goals:

- To aid in land preservation so that native plants are protected in their natural habitats;
- To encourage and offer guidance in the cultivation and propagation of wild plants;
- To educate the public on the scientific and aesthetic values of wild plants;
- To provide opportunities for Rhode Islanders to study and enjoy native plants in their natural habitats; and
- To offer our knowledge and skills to governmental, civic, and corporate organizations.

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