

D&H Canal walk: a treasure trove of history, lore

By Jane Anderson

Participants in a recent D&H Canal walk spent a few hours traversing the old towpath in Mamakating, but learned a lifetime's worth of history.

Interpretive naturalist Gary Keeton led about a dozen nature lovers July 11 on a fascinating tour of the remnants of the canal, which was a major transportation byway in the 1800s. Keeton is a fount of information on the canal and just about every other aspect of the ecological history of the area, and he eagerly passed the time with interesting anecdotes.

The group began its trek in a sunny meadow off of Route 209, across from the Hometown Deli in Westbrookville. Keeton's trip back in time began in the near-present of the Bashakill, in the mid-20th century. He explained how the swamp, alternately drained and filled naturally due to alluvial outwash, glacial debris and a couple of hurricanes, provided ideal soil for Black Dirt farming.

The Bashakill is filled by the Pine Kill, which begins in Yankee Lake. The Bashakill's name came from Basha, the queen of local Native Americans in the area, Keeton said. Basha was the head "sachem," or chief, and was known as an accomplished healer in the 1650's through the 1680's, he added. The topography of the area that she loved so much, however, caused her death: five tributaries empty into the kill, and could cause it to rise between six and seven feet within two hours. Basha was stranded in the rising waters, and drowned.

As the present-day tour made its way gratefully toward the shady towpath, Keeton pointed out what appeared to be a messy tangle of black fluff. Turns out, it wasn't mere fluff; rather, it was black bear fur, recently shed by a frequent traveler on the trail, Keeton said.

D&H stands for Delaware and Hudson, the two rivers that are linked by the canal, which carried anthracite coal from Honesdale, Pa., to Kingston, N.Y. The first shovelful of dirt was dug for the canal in 1825. The area features many types of soil, and it so happened that the canal was dug into sand and gravel. What happens when sand and gravel meet water? Sure enough, the water drained away. Ever resourceful, the canal owners sought the help of the many local brickyards that relied on several clay beds. For quite a bit of money, the brickyard owners agreed to sell the rights to the clay beds. Lining the 108-mile-long canal with clay to a depth of four inches required an immense amount of clay – so much, in fact, that local brickyards soon disappeared, because there was no more clay to be had.

Keeton pointed out that all 108 miles of the canal were designed by civil engineers without the help of today's

algorithms and computers; one 17-mile stretch, in fact, was designed so carefully that there were no locks to adjust the water levels. By 1842, boats got bigger and the canal became more popular, so engineers built the towpath up higher (about 30 feet above the Bashakill) and lined the canal with stone. Those stone walls still exist along the canal, especially at the bends in the canal. The canal was wider at its curves, and canalers could use poles to shove their boats away from the stone walls along those curves.

Just as at sea, there were navigational rules on the canal. Northbound boats, on the port side of the canal, had the right of way over southbound boats, Keeton said.

There was one constant, however, throughout the length of the D&H: canal boats trumped wagon transportation by a long run. One ton of coal could be carried at a time over land. A canal boat could carry upwards of 155 tons, Keeton said.

Don't think that those boats sped up and down the canal. Keeton said the average speed was two miles per hour, tugged by mules. Why not horses? Well, if you've been a little lax in draining standing water in your yard, you'll know why: water in the slow-moving canal was rather stagnant, despite weirs that regularly drained it. Horses, driven by thirst, would have drunk that water and dropped dead. Mules, on the other hand, were too smart to want to drink that nasty stuff, Keeton said.

That bad water proved the bane of existence for families living along the canal route when it found its way into local wells. One local family Bible notes that eight family members died within three months from cholera, Keeton said.

By the 1860s, it was more than bad water that caused bad blood between canalers (or "canawlers") and locals. Canal work was tough, and workers were hard to come by. So the shadier canalers began kidnapping local children and forcing them to work, either driving the mules or aboard the boats. Some were as young as 6 to 9 years old, Keeton remarked. Strangely enough, adoptions in the area soared in the spring, but the children's luck soon ran out when they were abandoned in the fall by the canalers who adopted them. They were better off than others, though: Keeton noted that a cemetery was recently discovered with 35 unmarked child-sized graves.

Not all canal boat owners were bad, since they provided a direct route to Kingston for local farmers to sell their produce. Oftentimes, the canalers would barter veggies from the farmers in return for a bit of coal off the boat, small enough not to be discovered by the boat owners. That

Birding for Beginners *by Scott Graber*

The 2nd annual BKAAs Birding for Beginners field trip took place on May 31st. To better orient the group, I passed out resource material with information on bird field guides, suggestions on purchasing binoculars and much more. I displayed some of today's better bird field guides and discussed pros and cons of each. 21st century technology was also addressed as we chatted about various smartphone birding apps.

Like last year, our group started the morning by experiencing the vastness of the Bashakill from Haven Road. Almost immediately, we were treated to a terrific view of four Great Blue Herons flying overhead. We then spent time watching several Red-winged Blackbirds darting around the marsh. Emphasis was placed on the bird's song and the striking visual differences between the male and female. As we walked back toward the parking lot, a few of us caught a quick glimpse of a beautiful Cedar Waxwing. At the same time, I detected the song of a Scarlet Tanager in a nearby tree. But, to our dismay, the bird did not appear and retreated back into the woodland.

Soon after, we drove across Haven Road and parked near the old railroad bed trail on the west side of the Bashakill (known to many as the "Stop Sign" trail). Our first treat was a Yellow Warbler singing in a small maple tree. Just as everyone was focusing his or her binoculars on this little fellow, the morning light suddenly improved and the bird's lovely egg-yolk coloration was accentuated. A real delight for our group!

Further down the trail, we watched a pair of Grey Catbirds and a male American Redstart. An Ovenbird was heard singing in the adjacent woods and soon made an appearance along the trail for all to see. A male Baltimore Oriole was also heard but remained somewhat obscured in the overhead thick-leaved branches. A very vocal Tufted Titmouse seemed to greet us as he pronounced his loud "Peter-Peter-Peter" song from a trailside maple. Deeper into the forest, an Eastern Wood-Pewee sang its distinctive "pee-a-wee" song.

Our excellent morning eventually concluded at the South Road boat launch. Here we experienced close-up views of two species of swallows. A pair of Barn Swallows was working over the edges of a small puddle gathering bits of mud for probable nest improvement. Once they took flight, I was able to point out their long forked tails – a very telling field mark. In the opposite direction was a nesting pair of Tree Swallows. These birds had utilized a small wooden nest box that had been placed only a few yards into the marsh. We marveled at their blue-green iridescent plumage and contrasting white underside. An Eastern

Kingbird proved to be our last bird of the day as one of our group members perfectly described the white band at the tip of its tail.

I'd like to thank the enthusiastic participants who helped make this year's Birding for

Beginners field trip a great success. This event allows me to share my longtime passion for birds with nice folks who are relatively new to birding or simply enjoy the birds around their home but have yet to take the next step toward species identification.

Please watch for next year's BKAAs program schedule as Birding for Beginners promises to offer another great spring morning of birds at the Bashakill.

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thread of sneakiness ran through many people along the route, Keeton said. Women of less-than-high morals would stand atop bridges over the canal, lift their hoop skirts as boats traveled underneath ... and cause a lot of boat wrecks.

Canal-side stores – which operated from 1828 to 1898 - provided items that couldn't be supplied by farmers, such as fodder for the mules. On the path, Keeton pointed out the stone remnants of a local store, which included a root cellar. Metal detectors have found hundreds of two-cent pieces at the site. The ruins are now enveloped by the thick woods that carpet the canal path. It's hard to believe, but Keeton said the D&H land had no trees – that's zero – along its length. The comparatively recent trees now offer homes for many species of animals.

On Keeton's trek, he pointed out a birdhouse way up high in the trees. It's one of several nest boxes for wood ducks, and Keeton shared their story: In the 1940s and '50s, wood ducks were nearly extinct, prized by hunters for their bright colors. Caring people succeeded in getting ducks to lay eggs, but the hatchlings mostly died soon after they hatched. Noticing that the ducks nested high in the trees, those people watched as momma ducks appeared to shove their babies out of the nest to what appeared to be their certain death. But no, it was those ducks who survived. One man tested a hypothesis, and when a hatchling he cared for hatched, he marked its belly and gently tossed it against a curtain in his home. That duckling survived. Keeton said it's surmised that the fall knocks their respiratory systems into proper working order.

Keeton's presentation wound down as the tour turned around to make its way back to the starting point, but it fueled the interest of many participants, who were full of questions that Keeton happily spent time answering.