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In the Wild

*Nighttime creatures croak and chirp,
only the silent sun
wakes the birds.*

Norman Taylor's Montauk

Larry Penny

This is taken from "Nature Notes" from the *East Hampton Star* (9/6/2012), on Norman Taylor, a man who occupies an important place in Montauk's environmental history.

Norman Taylor was a well-traveled botanist and the curator of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. In 1923 he published a monograph on the flora of Montauk, subtitled "A Study of Grassland and Forest." He probably picked Montauk because it was largely undeveloped, had the second largest prairie on Long Island, was topographically varied, and was bathed with seawater on three sides. Montauk had just about every kind of habitat found elsewhere on Long Island with the exception of pine barrens. It had features along the ocean that the rest of Long Island's oceanfront expanse lacked, namely, tall bluffs stuffed with clays and glacial erratics.

Behind the bluffs was a dwarf forest and a heath land, not unlike those for which Ireland and the British Isles are renowned. It was identified locally by the early inhabitants, many of whom came from heath-land areas in the Old World, as "the moors." In Taylor's time Lake Montauk was still the largest freshwater pond on Long Island. It sat between extensive "downs" to the east and west. Hither Woods was just recovering from almost two hundred years of woodcutting and grazing, and was still dotted with grasslands. The only mature woods, per se, were the Point Woods, which covered most of the south half of Montauk west of the Lighthouse.

Because the glacier and its aftermath had deposited so much clay over the land, the soils were impervious, which means that water from



Montauk's bluffs erode from wind and wave to form surrealistic fluted bluffs called "hoodoos" because of their unique clay-filled composition. Ditch Plains is in the background.

rainfall mostly runs off, in ditches, toward the ocean, Lake Montauk, Oyster Pond, Big Reed Pond, and Fresh Pond—thus the name "Ditch Plains." Much of the precipitation was trapped in depressions, kettle holes and such, creating numerous little ponds, swales, and flattish meandering wetlands. Russell Stein, a former resident of Montauk and ex-East Hampton Town Attorney, aptly called Montauk a "Swiss cheese," owing to its perforated land surface; geologists called it a "knob and kettle" topography.

Not counting algae, liverworts, mosses, mushrooms, and the like, Taylor recorded over 400 different plant species, many of which were pressed and deposited at his Botanic Garden and are still housed there today. Vicki Bustamante and I are tracing his steps to see how the flora has changed in his absence. Except for First, Second, and Third houses and an inn near the Lighthouse, the only other structures of note in Taylor's time were the Lifesaving Station at Ditch

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Plains and the “Four Sisters,” houses designed by Stanford White on the bluffs to the east of the station.

Taylor could stand on the top of Fort Hill near the northeast of Fort Pond and see clearly all the way to the Lighthouse. There was nothing but grasslands to block his view. He remarked how in late summer these grasslands were pink with a thick covering of sandplain gerardia blooms. Ironically, a little more than seventy years after his study was published, less than a hundred of the plants were left, and a species once plentiful was reduced to such a low number that it became the second New York State plant species to be declared “federally endangered.”

The grasslands, what’s left of them, are still home to several plants now considered almost as rare by the New York State Heritage office in Albany. These include the bushy frostweed, which can be found on the Nature Conservancy’s “Montauk Mountain” west of Fort Pond and the New England blazing star, which graces Shadmoor Park. Taylor also found the “cloudberry,” a rare species of blackberry that is alpine in habit. It hasn’t been recorded since, but we are hopeful that a few will turn up. The closest living ones to Montauk are high up on Mt. Washington and other northern New England and Canadian peaks.

Montauk is also orchid-rich; it has at least seven different species, and several species of native lilies, including the trout lily, turk’s-cap lily, wood lily, and Canada lily. But you have to do a lot of scratching here and there to find one.

Montauk is probably the richest area in the country with respect to shad coverage. It has four different species: the common one with multiple stems (*Amelanchier canadensis*), the smooth shad, (*Amelanchier laevis*), the intermediate (in height) shad (*Amelanchier intermedia*), and last, the diminutive Nantucket shad (*Amelanchier nantucketensis*). The next nearest spot for them is Nantucket Island, where they were first discovered.



Theodore Roosevelt County Park still retains some of the grasslands that covered Montauk from Fort Hill all the way to the Lighthouse in Taylor's day. Oyster Pond is to the right.

Over the last half century or so, some Southern species have taken up residence in Montauk. These include the southern red oak and the Hercules' club, a scruffy tree with pretty white flowers and numerous thorns to keep the deer away from its flowers and leaves.

The oak–American holly association is very rare on Long Island, and much like some oak–holly communities along the Jersey shore. Montauk is fern rich, especially in the wetlands and water edges associated with Big Reed Pond in the county park. There are at least ten different fern species in Montauk, including the rare Massachusetts fern and interrupted fern.

The Walking Dunes west of Hither Hills are a miracle in themselves, with two species of orchids and a host of bog plants dominated by cranberries. Parts of the dunes resemble the “sunken forest” of Fire Island, as the sand is continually moving to the south-south-east and the pitch pines and other trees and shrubs in their path are being slowly buried. One of the rarest orchids in the Western hemisphere is a mere stone's throw away from these dunes.

Since Lake Montauk was opened to Block Island Sound during the occupancy of Carl Fisher in the 1920s, Fort Pond has taken its place

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on the Long Island leader board. It is second in size behind Lake Ronkonkoma. With sea-level rise it is steadily creeping up. It has a little island in its northeast area, once called “Brush Island” because it was covered with woody plants, which is now largely underwater; all of the woodies are dead. The only American basswood tree that Taylor was able to locate in Montauk happened to be on this island, along with some other broadleaved tree species.

Taylor’s list includes less than ten species that are foreign, that is, exotic, perhaps, even invasive. Only a few of each, however, were found, including barnyard grass, trees-of-heaven, yarrow, bindweed, Kentucky blue grass, chickweed, and a few others. No Asiatic bit-tersweet, Japanese knotweed, mugwort, dandelion, Tartarian hon-ey-suckle, mile-a-minute weed, lamb’s-ears, Japanese black pine, Eurasian phragmites, Japanese honeysuckle, and the like. Vicki and I have been keeping track of the invasives as we go along. So far there are at least fifty on the list, and some, like the phragmites, have taken over whole plant communities. Recently, Vicki reported that she had found black swallow-wort at Shadmoor, a new one for Montauk and one that can take over the world if left to play.

If Norman Taylor were with us today, he might not believe what he experienced. If he were botanizing today in Montauk, he might have tossed it in. If you’re a naturalist, better to be early than late.