

# Hiking Paumanok: A Year on Long Island's Long Trail



A scene along the 125-mile long Paumanok Path. *Sheryl Huber Jones photos*

**By Annette Hinkle**

Every so often, adventures insert themselves into our lives — daring us to undertake a challenge we may never have considered before.

For Sherryl Huber Jones, just such an adventure came her way in December 2013.

At the time, she was finishing up a masters program in environmental management at Stony Brook University and, during a class break, she happened to notice a map of Long Island’s hiking trail system on a hallway wall.

“I love maps and, checking it out, I noticed this really long line,” she recalls.



Rocky Point State Park, Mile 0-7, Leg 1. March 9, 2014.

That long, horizontal line ran through most of Suffolk County – from Rocky Point in the west to Montauk Point in the east. It was the Paumanok Path, an interconnected system of trails that pass through several towns and traverse a full range of ecosystems– from hardwood forests and marshes, to coastal dunes and pine barrens.

Ms. Huber Jones, a Hampton Bays native who fancies herself a naturalist, was intrigued and began devising a plan to conquer the Paumanok Path – all 125 miles of it – in a series of day hikes. She had many reasons for wanting to hike the path, including a keen sense of curiosity, but perhaps chief among her goals was a desire to find solace in the midst of the break-up of her marriage.

“I was going through a hard separation and I used this as a goal to keep focused,” explains Ms. Huber Jones.

So one night in January, 2014 she sat down in her Mattituck home with some maps and her best friend, Karen Flint, to share the route she would hike in the months ahead.

“Karen said, ‘You’re not doing that alone.’ She wanted to do it with me,” recalls Ms. Huber Jones. “She was an amazing partner.”

It turns out it made sense to have a hiking companion – not just for safety reasons in case something went wrong in the woods, but for transportation as well.





Ridge to Brookhaven, Mile 7-15, Leg 2, March 18, 2014.

“Doing the thru hikes it was important you had two cars,” explains Ms. Huber Jones. “We could figure out in advance how far we wanted to go in a day, drop one car off at the end and drive back to the start.”

On March 9, 2014, the pair set out for the first leg of their journey – mile 0 to 7 – starting in Rocky Point. Sixteen legs and 118 more miles would follow in the months ahead. Hiking when their schedules allowed, the women averaged 8 to 10 miles per leg and by June, they had reached Southampton. After taking summer off to avoid ticks and excessive heat, they started again in late October near the Southampton/East Hampton border and spent the rest of the year working their way out to Montauk.

On December 30, 2014, they reached the Montauk Point Lighthouse.

“I wanted to get it done before the end of the year,” explains Ms. Huber Jones. “Big game shotgun season begins January 1, this was a way to celebrate the new year and avoid the shotgun season.”

Though Long Island has a reputation for being flat, Ms. Huber Jones found there was plenty of challenge to be had on the Paumanok Path and she has the data to prove it. That’s because she used the app MapMyHike to record the duration, distance, pace, speed, elevation, calories burned and route for the entire journey.

And contrary to popular belief, there are hills on Long Island.

“Bald Hill [near Riverhead] is very hilly,” she says.

Watching the changing landscape throughout the course of the trek was Ms. Huber Jones' favorite part of the adventure. Fresh ponds with wild orchids, lady slippers and fiery red mushrooms growing from charred trees in a burnt section of the Pine Barrens were some of the things she saw along the way.

"In the western section by Rocky Point, there were very old stands of trees you could tell had been untouched for a while," she says. "There were also a lot of glacial erratics. Every time I saw one I tried to climb it."

"In one section, your entire environment changes in a distance of 10 miles from a hardwood forest dominated by oaks and maples," she



Manorville to Riverhead, Mile 22-31, Leg 4, March 27, 2014.

adds. "Then you go into an evergreen area, or hollies, and white pine stands. That was particularly true in the Northwest Woods section of East Hampton."

"You had so much laurel through Noyac and when you got to Montauk, it was rhododendrons and everything you love about Montauk – salt pruned trees that were short and super brambly," she says. "Heading out from Montauk village to the point was pastureland and very moorish, like Scotland."

"I didn't know a lot of the trails. I think it's important to let people know what is in their own backyard."

Despite the fact Suffolk County is one of the most populous in America, during their trek, Ms. Huber Jones and Ms. Flint encountered just two other people on the trails – a man on horseback in Manorville and a hiker in Montauk.

In the end, when she reached The End, Ms. Huber Jones enjoyed experiencing an incredible sense of accomplishment – both physically and emotionally.





Shinnecock Hills to Tuckahoe, Mile 60-66, Leg 8, May 18, 2014.

“I would do this again, without hesitation. It made me realize how important hiking is in a cathartic and mental health sense,” says Ms. Huber Jones. “It was the most perfectly timed thing I could’ve done in my life. The amount of pride I had in that sense of accomplishment is still carrying me.”

Probably nobody understands both the triumphs and tribulations of the Paumanok Path like Ken Kindler. Founder of Hike Long Island, for the last quarter century he has dedicated his life to building, improving and advocating for the Island’s trail systems.

Though it functions under a single name, the Paumanok Path (which is named for the Algonquin word for “land of tribute”) is actually a series of trails maintained by various non-profit volunteer organizations, including the Long Island Greenbelt Trail Conference to the west and, further east, the Southampton and East Hampton Trails Preservation Societies.

Mr. Kindler explains that the idea for the Paumanok Path was born in the 1980s with Professor Ken Ettlinger and his students at Suffolk County Community College whom he would take on field trips to the Pine Barrens. The students were energized by these outings and the Greenbelt initiative was born. The first section of trail was marked near Pleasure Drive in Sears Bellows County Park in Flanders and, piece by piece, other trails were created and linked in the decades that followed.





Along the Hither Hills to Montauk stretch of the Paumonak Path, Mile 117-128, December 28, 2014.

While the groups have been able to accomplish amazing things, Mr. Kindler notes that because they are staffed solely by volunteers, there have also been problems as well.

“Originally, the philosophy was they didn’t want to divide the land with new segments so they used surfing roads or straight fire roads, and people would just follow them,” says Mr. Kindler, who explains the problem with trails like this is they don’t shed water and are prone to erosion.

“The whole art of building a good trail is dropping the water off of it,” says Mr. Kindler. “In the 80s when we first started putting the trails in, there wasn’t a lot of science amongst people doing it. There was some kind of an idea the trail should meander, but a lot of the old trails should be reengineered now to make them sustainable.”

“The trails groups are the only way we have gotten anything done, they’ve done it all with just volunteer labor,” he says. “What they’ve accomplished is miraculous, it would be a shame not to steward it properly.”

Recently, the Southampton Trails Preservation Society hired Mr. Kindler to be steward of the Southampton portion of the Paumanok Path. It's a first of its kind paid position and it represents a huge step forward in maintaining a trail system that has been, to this point, solely the work of well-intentioned volunteers.

"I feel like we're approaching a crisis, and I don't see us doing what it takes to make these trails sustainable," he says. "We need to fix and reroute a lot of them. There are constantly going to be parts of the trail breaking down. We need projects like creating climbing turns or switchbacks. "

"We have to do something different, not enough resources are being given to the trails, we're overwhelmed," he says.

One of the first priorities Mr. Kindler will undertake is reblazing parts of the Paumanok Path so it can be followed easily (particularly in the Tuckahoe region where Ms. Huber Jones got hopelessly lost one day). His second priority will be to create maps and an interpretive guide. He is also a vocal advocate for cracking down on illegal ATV use, which has done major damage to fragile, sandy trails, particularly further west along the path.

"I have all these visions of what I'd like to see on the Paumanok path – accessible parking, easy to read maps, port-a-potties or restrooms somewhere near the trail," says Mr. Kindler. "This is my chance to show people how nice a trail system can be. The network of trails is grand, the resources they travel through is stunning with unique geology and water all around us."

"The island is a miraculous place, the shoreline is alive. It's such an enormous resource we have."





Camp Hero to Montauk Point, Mile 128-135, Leg 17, December 29, 2014.