

Margaret Doutt Preserve, Waquoit

The Moonakis River is the lower section of the Quashnet River. This area of Waquoit was annexed from Mashpee in 1725. One reason for Falmouth's acquisition of the area including the river may have been the famous fishery, for herring, sea-run brook trout, and eels. Another reason may have been the potential for water power, which when realized, destroyed the fishery.

The dam that created the water power is upstream of Route 28, in the freshwater section of the river, under Martin Road. Downstream of Route 28 the Moonakis is salt water—the tide comes up just about to the highway. And this is where you will find the Margaret Doutt Preserve. This 9½ acre preserve is about half abandoned cranberry bog and half woodland. But the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and though it isn't a big area, there is a lot to do and see here.

In the old cranberry bog, feral cranberries still survive in many areas, producing lots of berries in some years and few-to-none in others. This is why cranberry growers work so hard to counter the effects of natural forces such as frost, competing plants, and insects—they hope to increase the harvest and make it more consistent. As the bog is no longer maintained, trees and shrubs are gradually taking hold. The Red Maples and willows are expectable; the Pitch Pines are more surprising in soil so damp that it supports cranberries and sphagnum moss. But the succession to trees is slow; the trees may occasionally be damaged by periods of high water. The damp environment also encourages the soft green fringe of *Usnea* lichens on many Red Maples. The water-control ditches dug to serve the cranberry bogs are still a feature here. Some trails cross ditches on small plank bridges; other ditches require a short jump.

On the surrounding uplands the young woods are typical of abandoned agricultural land reverting to woods. The senescent pioneer Pitch Pines will soon be overtaken by the oaks that have germinated and grown in their shade. The oaks would have had a hard time getting started without the pines, but they will shortly take over. Beneath the trees the same process is taking place—pioneer Reindeer Moss and Bearberry grew in bare sand and full sun. But as trees have become established the pioneers are being out-competed by the Wintergreen and other shade-tolerant plants which grow vigorously in the developing soil. A spur trail in the southeast corner of the Doutt Preserve leads up and over a small headland to a spot with a lovely view up and down the river, and often, a breeze.

In the southern edge of the abandoned cranberry bog is an area where the invasive Common Reed, *Phragmites*, has gotten quite a foothold. In the summer of 2005 volunteers with the town's wetland invasive plants working group spent many hours cutting the reeds in preparation for town employees to drip carefully-targeted herbicide into each stem, a method that has been shown elsewhere to control the invasive plant and not damage other members of the ecosystem. Although the work did set the *Phragmites* back a bit, the job was too big and too labor-intensive to be sustainable, and has been discontinued. The invasives have recovered and spread since that time. In other parts of town more mechanized methods are being used. They work well and can conquer large acreages of this aggressive invader, but those methods cost money, which is not available for most open space sites.

Beyond the bog and woods is the estuary of the Moonakis River, where we started. The Doutt

Preserve has several hundred yards of frontage on the river, with some miniature salt marshes shaded by Tupelo trees that turn magnificent tones of burgundy and claret in August. The river bank is a lovely spot for a picnic on a summer evening. In winter this is a good place to see ducks like Buffleheads and Red-breasted Mergansers. If you have a boat that is light enough to carry for a five-minute walk you can put it in the water here. Upstream the water gets thin quickly, but downstream there is much to explore between here and Waquoit Bay—and then there is the bay!

The Margaret Doutt Preserve is on the east side of Moonakis River Road, about 1/4 mile south of Route 28. Park in the unpaved road by the sign and walk down to the water. A trail map can be downloaded and printed from the website of The 300 Committee: www.300committee.org. Trail maps of 24 other open space parcels are also on the website, along with a nature calendar and much other information about conservation land.