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BENNETT'S POND AND BEYOND

KEY AT-A-GLANCE
INFORMATION**LENGTH:** 8.1 miles**ELEVATION GAIN:** 1,506 feet**CONFIGURATION:** 2 connected loops**DIFFICULTY:** Moderate**SCENERY:** Rolling trails parallel field-stone walls in a deciduous forest with some conifer pockets, a lily lake, and a fishing pond.**EXPOSURE:** Shady canopy cover**TRAFFIC:** Usually light, except on weekends and summer evenings**TRAIL SURFACE:** Packed dirt and lots of rocks**HIKING TIME:** 4 hours**DRIVING DISTANCE:** 58 miles**SEASON:** Year-round, 8 a.m.–sunset**ACCESS:** Free; pets on leash not exceeding 7 feet**MAPS:** Large map at entrance kiosk; USGS *Bethel*; download from tinyurl.com/bennettspndmap, tinyurl.com/pinemountainmap, and tinyurl.com/hemlockhillsmatp to connect the three different trail systems.**FACILITIES:** None**COMMENTS:** Be alert to hunters in the fall. For more information, call 860-424-3200 or visit tinyurl.com/bennettspndsp.

GPS COORDINATES

N41° 19.728' W73° 28.860'

IN BRIEF

What's not to like about wandering a densely forested woodland, complete with a couple of ponds (one of which is patrolled by swans and beavers), where you are more likely to encounter wildlife than other hikers? The only thing we can think of is that eventually—after several heart-thumping climbs to boulder-filled ridges, with a few scenic swamps in between—you will have to leave this wonderful park.

DESCRIPTION

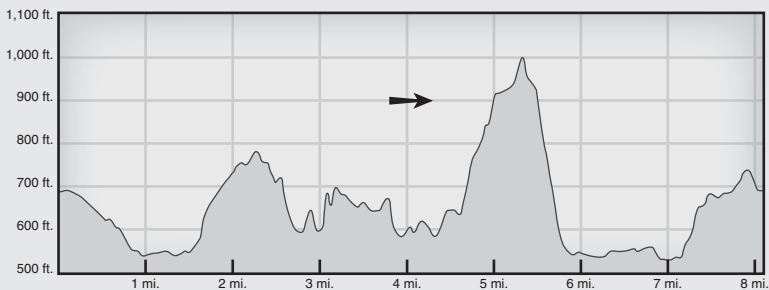
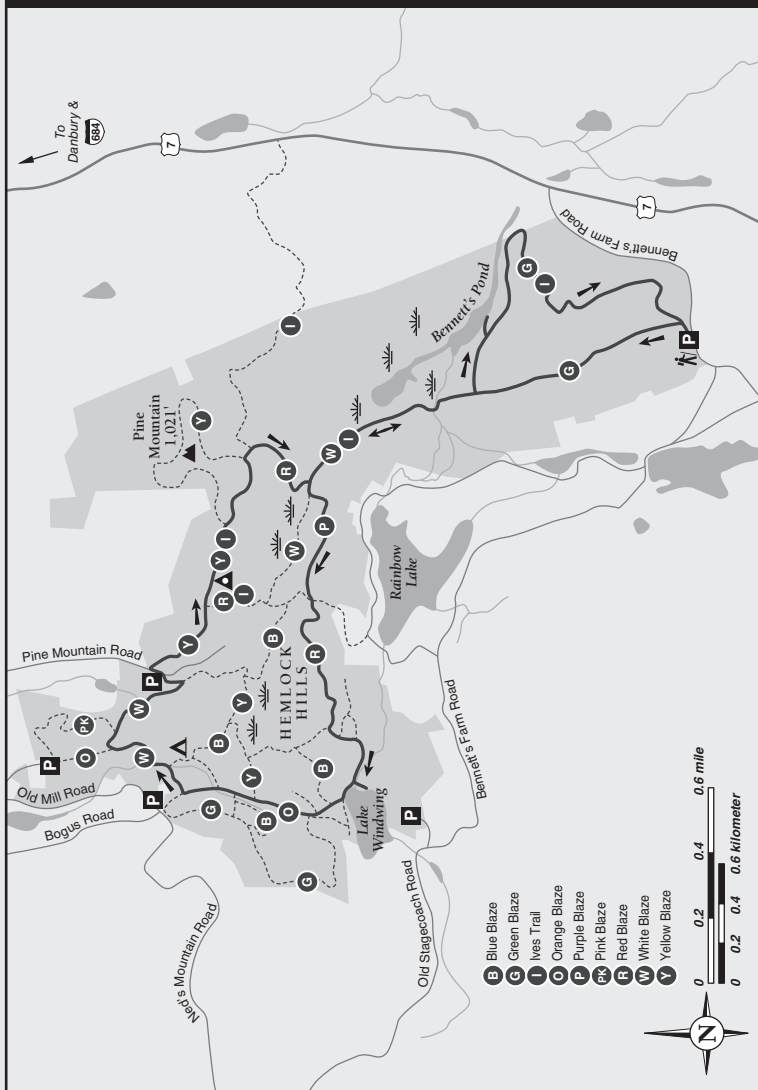
Bennett's Pond State Park is yet another in a too-short-but-growing list of properties saved from the bulldozer of "development." It didn't just "become" a state park in 2002—Bennett's Pond was set aside only after years of protracted legal skirmishes and complex negotiations. All of which was put in motion back in 1997, when corporate giant IBM sold a 650-acre plot of pristine woodland to a developer. As word got around that said developer was considering using the space to build several hotels and conference centers, an 18-hole golf course, and hundreds of condominiums, a coalition of conservationists and community-minded citizens stirred into action. A petition drive, largely spearheaded by Ellen Burns, president of Ridgefield's Open Space Association (and owner

Directions



Follow the Henry Hudson Parkway North, which becomes the Sawmill River Parkway North. Drive about 30 miles and merge onto I-684 North. Proceed 10.4 miles to Exit 9E and merge onto I-84 East. Continue 6.4 miles to Exit 3 and merge onto CT 7 South. After 3.9 miles turn right on Bennett's Farm Road. The parking lot is 0.7 mile ahead, on the right.

Bennett's Pond and Beyond





Louis D. Conley, a retired New York City businessman, built his estate on this hilltop. The crumbling chimney may be a remnant of his 34-room mansion.

of Books on the Common, a local bookstore), sought to convince the town to acquire the property via eminent domain. Eventually, that campaign—and a settlement of \$12 million on the developer—resulted in a division of the land, with the northern 458-acre tract gaining the designation of state park.

As you stroll among the ancient maples and pines that flank the main trail into the park, you might consider how appropriate it is that this land was saved from the wrecking ball of modernity. About a century ago, it (along with hundreds of surrounding acres) was known as Outpost Farm. Established in 1914 as the home of Louis Conley, an aluminum-foil magnate, it also became known as the one of the largest plant nurseries on the East Coast, employing scores of workers while supplying shrubs and trees to Yale, Harvard, Franklin Roosevelt's Hyde Park property, the Berlin Turnpike, and many other companies and communities.

Conley's 34-room mansion, which was later turned into a boys' school, is long gone, having been razed to the ground in 1974. And few but trained arborists will be able to identify the more distinguished descendants of his cultivations among an expansive forest often crowded with the hemlocks and hardwoods so commonplace to our region. No matter, for the pleasures and surprises of Bennett's Pond have less to do with its history than with the tranquil retreat it offers from civilization, and from one of the more densely populated corners of Connecticut.

The 8-mile hike described below travels through a vast hemlock grove, passes among dramatic outcroppings, crests by the ruins of a cabin believed to have been owned by composer Charles Ives, and concludes near Bennett's Pond, a 56-acre expanse of water often patrolled by graceful swans. If, along the way, you failed to observe wild turkeys, coyotes, foxes, deer, or beavers, well, you must not have been trying very hard.

From the car lot, walk east to the park sign and a dirt path that leads directly to a kiosk, where trail maps are posted. This hike begins with the Green Trail (green blazes), which goes both straight and left. Take the left leg, which overlaps an unpaved forest road, a wide, pebble-surfaced track that descends gently into the forest, devolving into chunky rubble as it does so. After about two-thirds of a mile, the path arcs to the right and arrives at a somewhat overgrown junction, where cattail reeds and poison ivy thrive. Green continues straight here, but you should swing left, now on the White Trail (white blazes). (Alternatively, if you are only up for a short outing, remain with the Green Trail as it leads to the shore of Bennett's Pond and then circles back to the kiosk, shaving the hike down to a 2.1-mile sprint. Skip down nine paragraphs to resume the narrative.)

If you are still with us on the White Trail, be assured that the better part of the hike still awaits. Ignore the many social trails along this stretch of trail, as you walk among sheep laurel and wild azalea (lovely pink blossoms in spring), while drawing closer to the water. In a few minutes, the dirt-packed trail (more of a muddy morass after heavy rainfall) jogs left through a gap in an old stone wall, yielding an improved view of Bennett's Pond as it climbs slightly to higher ground. Padding along White, which soon passes over a bridge and then swings to the right, remember to scan the pond for swans and beavers. At the very least you should be able to spot the latter's lodges and, if the weather is warm, hear the distinctive call of red-winged blackbirds.

In 10 minutes or so of hiking in near-proximity to the pond, you may observe bull lilies and foam flowers giving way to sedge grass and skunk cabbage, as the water thickens to a swampy consistency. The White Trail then pulls away from what's left of Bennett's Pond, for a short time paralleling a tributary stream, its banks well colored by such springtime bloomers as trillium, bloodroot, and jack-in-the-pulpit. Skip the subsequent spur (and numerous social trails) and follow the white blazes to the left at the next intersection, where a bridge lies to the right (you will be returning via this second trail in a few hours).

A rapid ascent ensues, bringing you, in a couple of minutes of huffing, to a T. The white markings head right, while you should turn left, on the purple-blazed path. The climb persists, drawing you deeper into a mature forest of impressively large tulip trees, as well as a smattering of maples and oaks. Skip the spur to the left, as the main track bends toward the right, threads through a notch of lichen-specked granite, and proceeds to zigzag by a few antediluvian erratics. After several minutes of meandering in this undulating, attractively wild setting of

oversize rocks and boulders, the purple trail comes to a T: go left, now following red blazes.

This next stretch of trail is great fun, displaying a fair amount of sinuosity in traveling through a granite-rich landscape colored with laurels, hemlocks, maples, and—at certain times of the year—an amazing array of mushrooms popping up from among the moss-coated rock debris. Stick with the red-blazed route even as several unmarked spurs surface, first on the left, then, in perhaps 10 minutes, on the right, and, once the inevitable descent begins, two more (connecting the Pine Mountain ski loop) to the left. Finally, with the imposing bluffs now behind you, replaced by a seasonal stream and slow-moving swamp, the suddenly wide trail emerges from under tree cover by the edge of Lake Windwing.

Both the Red Trail and the hike proceed to the right, but you may first want to rest for a spell on a sun-struck rock, soaking in a waterside vista. If so, swing left, cross over the bridge by the concrete dam, and make yourself at home. Once back on the main circuit, however, you will have all of about a minute before the switch to your next trail—to the right, blazed orange. This path pitches sharply uphill initially, passes a blue-tagged spur, and then levels off. Stay with orange, straight onward, at the imminent junction with an unpaved forest road, and likewise ignore the appearances of green-, yellow-, and blue- blazed routes that appear in somewhat rapid succession on your left, right, and left again as you stride along this wide, easy lane.

Your departure from the Orange Trail comes just after an unmarked spur on the right, when you meet the White Trail (white blazes), also on the right. Take White as it leads you into a denser part of the forest, dropping off the ridge and, once by a blue-blazed turnoff on the right, bending left and paralleling a swamp stream. On crossing that swamp, White next passes first an orange-blazed path, then a pink-blazed one (both on the left), crosses a short bridge, and, on ascending an earthen dam, meets yet another blue-tagged trail (forking left). Take the right option, still with White, as the moss-sided track scoots between some imposing slabs of granite (look for pink lady's slipper orchids if you happen to be here in mid-May). White ends at a junction with the Yellow Trail, where you turn left.

When Yellow hits Pine Mountain Road, a few moments later, step around the steel gate and lurch left on the pavement. Keep an eye out for the yellow blazes, first on a telephone pole on the left side of the road, then on a utility pole on the right side. Shortly after the latter, Yellow resumes its forested route, on the right. Now forging uphill, this commences what is perhaps the most strenuous part of the hike, and also one of the more subliminally appealing. Plan to remain with Yellow for the next mile or so, ignoring the many spurs and side trails that crop up as the track first surmounts the craggy slope, then courses along the lush, grassy ridge. The apex of your effort, shortly after the Ives Trail (red blaze on yellow, overlain with a musical clef symbol) merges with Yellow from the right, is a granite plateau fringed with pitch pines, oaks, and one or two dogwoods.



If you're hearing "Jingle Bells" three months after Christmas, it means spring peepers are out.

From that lovely perch, which is blessed with an expansive view of the southern hills, Ridgefield direction, the undulating trail skips by the start and end of the short Pine Mountain Loop (yellow blazes) before cresting at the ruin of what some believe was Charles Ives's cabin. All that remains is the fieldstone chimney, which is slowly, sadly being picked apart by vandals intent on using its stones for their own improvised fire rings. Wandering farther along the pristine ridge, the track soon comes to a kiosk, where the Ives Trail breaks off from Yellow. Turn right, following the Ives, and turn right again, in roughly 100 yards, at the junction with the red-blazed Bennett's Pond Trail (BPT). At the conclusion of this precipitous descent, the BPT crosses a wooden bridge and rejoins the white trail of earlier, closing one of your loops.

Veer left on the White Trail and retrace your earlier steps all the way back to that overgrown junction by the cattail reeds, where you initially turned off the Green Trail. Swing left on Green, and in the course of 15 minutes the path will draw you close to the pickerelweed-rimmed edge of Bennett's Pond. By all means, take the short spur to sit on a waterside rock; just keep an eye out for poison ivy. Green eventually breaks to the right, away from the pond, slicing through a stone wall and rolling to the right when it hits a forest lane. On departing that wide track, Green then undertakes a two-stage uphill burst, emerging at the perimeter of an open field of knee- to waist-high grass. The trail keeps to the north-northeast side of the meadow, dips briefly back into tree cover, and, at the subsequent small

clearing, arrives at an asphalt turnaround, part of an old driveway, with an ancient maple growing in middle of it. Stay with Green to the right of the park kiosk, and in a minute you should reach the entrance kiosk, where you can pick up the path back to the parking lot.

As for the remaining 155 acres of Bennett's Pond's original tract, the parcel that *wasn't* turned into a state park? It lies across the road to the south, still in limbo, as the developer persists in its drive to turn the wild, wooded land into 300 or so townhouses.

NEARBY ACTIVITIES

Just a little north, in Danbury, is elegant **Tarrywile Mansion**, with attractively landscaped gardens, easy trails, a greenhouse, and several outbuildings. It is listed in the National Register of Historic Places as an outstanding example of Shingle-style Victorian-era architecture. Visit the mansion, or hike the trails, after consulting tarrywile.com or calling 203-744-3130.