

Winter so sweet - Adventures along the Seacoast's Sweet Trail

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For the adventurers among us, it's comforting to know that there's a centrally located, four-mile, multi-use trail available that's perfect for winter weather excursions. The Sweet Trail in Durham and Newmarket boasts not only a tantalizing name but year-round public access via a carefully interconnected series of conservation easements, private lands, and other preserved areas. While certainly no secret, the Sweet Trail is special in that it lulls hikers into a feeling of being alone in the wild while being conveniently located near civilization. You are never too far away from reality. Being an out-and-back trail, however, it can add up to over eight miles of relatively unspoiled fun. And, with a host of side trails to explore, one could make it a full day excursion with a little imagination and preparation.



Whether you're into hiking, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing on ungroomed trails, or just walking your dog (leashed), all of these options are available along the Sweet Trail.

Ideally, to explore the trail properly, one would begin at the northernmost portion of the trail at the Longmarsh Road Preserve in Durham, and travel 4.3 miles south to dramatic views of the Great Bay in Newmarket. The well-marked and windy footpath will bring you through numerous marshes, upland forest, freshwater wetlands, beaver ponds, streams, and tidal salt marshes. There is a significant amount of wetland and wildlife activity throughout your journey, with photo/Instagram opportunities everywhere you turn.

Once reaching the Great Bay, you can hop on a spur trail, sip a thermos of coffee, or just admire your surroundings and prepare for the journey back. You can also spot a vehicle here and be on your way. The beauty of a winter approach? No bugs!

The trail is a culmination of efforts by various conservationists who laboriously pieced together land areas in the Lubberland and Crommet Creek. Much of the land is managed by various preservation-minded nonprofit agencies, while other parcels fall to private landowners and New Hampshire Fish and Game. Ownership of the project is in the hands of the Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership. The idea of all these parties coming together to work toward a single goal is perhaps what makes the Sweet so sweet.

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The trail is clearly marked with white and blue GBRPP conservation badges throughout. There are a lot of spur trails, so be sure to grab a map online before you head out. The free map and guide also include information on parking and access points, wildlife viewing areas, and difficulty levels of the trail. The trails can get icy, so be sure to think through your footwear choices before heading out. Also, be cautious that hunting and trapping are allowed in some parts of the preserved areas, so wear blaze orange and keep dogs tethered.

As you wander through the rambling woods and over frozen waters, remember that much of this land was once slated to host the world's largest oil refinery. Billionaire oil magnate Aristotle Onassis proposed a massive petroleum refinery, a measure that was ultimately defeated by the efforts of Durham residents who strongly opposed the development. Look for a series of signs at the Crommet Creek parking area that detail this history.

Peter Wellenberger, director of the Great Bay Stewards, remembers this time of uncertainty, around 1974, quite well. “The whole Onassis proposal changed my career direction, and it is how I got interested in Great Bay,” Wellenberger recalls. “Prior to his idea to place an oil refinery in Durham, there was little interest in the bay. Much of the estuary was polluted from sewage as the Clean Water Act had only just passed and treatment plants were not on line yet. However, Durham residents recognized the refinery — which was to be the largest in the world at that time — would have a dramatic effect on the town and surroundings.”

According to local historian J. Dennis Robinson’s website, SeacoastNH.com, “3,500 acres along the shore of Great Bay were not torn up to accommodate the \$600,000,000 refinery. ... Instead, over 1,000 residents of Durham gave a resounding NO to the Onassis plan. They voted against the refinery that threatened the very survival of the state’s fragile seacoast ecosystem.”

David beat Goliath in this case, and much of the land has been preserved and made accessible for the public to enjoy. The Sweet Trail provides full access to some of the area’s best-kept secrets while providing year-round recreational opportunities for Seacoast residents.